Bowser's Princess Lessons
Chapter 1: In Which a Princess Gets Kidnapped
By Yu May

As the explosion shattered the wall of King Toadstool's palace, sending a marble pillar tumbling to the ground, Princess Peach could only sigh. Yes, it was going to be one of those days.

Her beloved father, King Toadstool, had finally decided to abdicate the throne to enjoy a quiet retirement playing golf and tennis. By the laws of the Mushroom Kingdom, a Toad Council of Elders would be appointed to safeguard the throne until Crown Princess Peach reached the age of majority, and finally take the title of Queen Toadstool.

At the moment, King Toadstool was quietly snoozing, a few inches from the shadow of the collapsing pillar that would have crushed him, had Mario not kicked his chair out of the way. As Mario scooped up Princess Peach and dove to safety, the pillar smashed across the dining room table, flattening his homemade cake into a pancake.

King Toadstool started awake for a moment. He scanned the room and spotted the magnificent, ancient crown resting on a pedestal at the center of the dining room in front of him. Satisfied that everything was perfectly in order, the king smacked his lips before dozing off again. "That's nice, dear…He seems like an upstanding young man…And once you're old enough, you'll inherit the crown…"

The champions of the realm, Sir Mario and Sir Luigi of the strange, distant land of Brooklyn, New York, had heroically volunteered to seek out the lost relic for the occasion. It was rumored to have been worn by the first Queen of the Mushroom Kingdom, before being sealed in the pyramids of Dry Dry Desert. Not wanting to let the boys have all the fun, Princesses Peach and Daisy had eluded their chauffeur, old Toadsworth, and tagged along for the adventure. Their first double date!

The quest to find the Crown of Queen Toadstool had been fraught with romance and danger, but that's another story for another day. Suffice to say they successfully found the crown and brought it home triumphally! Sure, Peach and Daisy had both gotten spanked as a reward for leaving their chaperone behind, but even that had been a sort of bonding experience for the two spirited Princesses.

The banquet had been prepared, and Peach and Daisy had both baked the cakes themselves as tokens of gratitude to the Mario Brothers. With a little coaching from Peach, Daisy had finally figured out how to bake a cake that was sweet rather than salty.

They had just sat down (rather gingerly, on silk cushions, in the two Princesses' cases) to enjoy the celebration. That was precisely the moment Bowser, King of the Koopas, chose to launch a full scale attack on the palace.

It had been a whole two weeks since Bowser's last kidnapping attempt. Peach should have known it was all too good to be true.

Apart from the fact that Daisy's attempt at decorating her cake with a letter "L" in green frosting was rather improved after being squashed flat by the crumbling pillar, this dinner was a complete disaster!

From behind the cloud of the crumbled debris, an army of Koopas and Goombas leapt into the fray, squaring off against the valiant but overmatched Royal Toad Guards. Peach heard Bowser's laugh before she saw him, along with a strange puttering sound.

Bowser arose, riding his flying clown car, laughing maniacally. Then, he choked on the dust and smoke in the air. "Bwa ha ha! Hack!! …My lungs?!? Gack!"

Kammy Koopa, a geriatric witch and Bowser's most loyal advisor, flew to his side astride her broomstick. "My Lord! Remember your asthma!"

Bowser slapped his chest, gasping for air. "This is worse than when I had to smoke six cartons of Marioro's to film that anti-smoking P.S.A.! Ahem, where was I? Oh, yes! Bwahahaha! Cower before me, mushy mushroom weaklings! K-Man Koopa is in the House! Now, where is my beautiful, boopy-boppy beaucoup bunny buttercup? Aha! There you are!"

As Bowser caught sight of the tell-tale silhouette of the crown and gown of a Princess behind the fog of war, he darted towards his target.

Realizing her King had abandoned her, Kammy's glasses almost fell off her beak in shock. "But, your terribleness! What about the–"

As Bowser reached out and grasped the Princess, he made a fishy-face as he lunged forward to steal a kiss. "My sweetie queen! Come give your favorite bad boy some sugar!"

Two gloved fists slammed into Bowser's face in a quick jab, cross, hook boxing maneuver. "Ugh! You're even uglier than that creep Tatanga!" snapped Princess Daisy, hopping back from his grasp into a mixed-martial arts fighting stance.

Bowser shook his head, before recognizing his mistake and backing away. "Oh, shell! You're not my Peaches! You're that hot head from Sarasaland. Bah! I don't want you! I'm a tyrant with taste!"

Daisy's face flushed to a furious red. She dove after the clown car to drag the enemy down, pulling it slightly off balance. "What's that supposed to mean? Am I not good enough for you?"

Ignoring Daisy's furious retorts, Bowser craftily piloted his clown car in a spiral to throw Daisy off his tail, then hovered out of reach to survey the battle.

Cowering under the table, Luigi heard a familiar screech. He emerged from behind the tablecloth just as Daisy lost her grip on the Clown Car above them, hurtling to the hard marble stone floor below. Without thinking, Luigi stumbled forward and caught her, breaking her fall. The force of the impact knocked Luigi flat on his back, his head cracking against the wooden table behind him on the way down.

Daisy winced and rubbed her tailbone before spotting her rescuer. “Oh, Luigi, you saved me! You’re a man among men!”

Overcome with joy, Daisy ran her fingers through Luigi’s hair, sending his hat flying as she kissed him full on the lips. As she finished the kiss, Luigi’s head fell back limply, his eyes dazed, a goofy smile on his face. “Luigi? Speak to me!” Daisy pressed her ear to his chest, realized he wasn’t breathing, and immediately began performing CPR.

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Luigi was floating in an ocean of blackness. Then, a shining light appeared above him. He started to swim towards it.

A beautiful voice echoed from the light. “Luigi? Can you hear my voice?”

Luigi’s mustache trembled, his eyes watered as he looked up in awe. “Who’s there?”

A glittering hand emerged from the light, as though beckoning him, “It’s me, Weegee.”

Luigi reached out for the delicate fingers. “Are you…an angel?”

The angelic hand slapped him sharply across the face. “Wake up, Luigi!”

Luigi snapped awake. He had a fleeting sense that he was drowning, before a blast of sweet air filled his lungs. Daisy pulled away from him, her eyes shut tight and brimming tears. “Don’t you dare die on me, Luigi! I never…I never got to say–”

“D-daisy?” Luigi stuttered.

Daisy’s eyes popped open. “Luigi? How dare you scare me like that!” Daisy kissed him so forcefully, Luigi flailed his arms, desperate for air again.

As she finished the smooch with a pop, Daisy ruffled Luigi’s hair gently. “You’ll never guess what happened! You just saved my life! Oh, you’re my hero!”

Luigi had a sneaking suspicion they had forgotten something important, but before he could interject, Daisy kissed him again. As the battle raged around them, Luigi decided that whatever it was he was trying to remember, it could probably wait.

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Meanwhile, at the smashed remains of the table reserved for the Toad Society for Widows and Orphans, Old Nanna Toad stood in front of the cowering group of orphaned children, shielding them from the approaching enemy soldiers of the Koopa Troop, a Goomba, and a Koopa Troopa. The Goomba wore a spiked-helmet, while the Koopa Troopa wore a pair of triangular sunglasses, as part of the official Bad Guy Dress Code for The Koopa Kingdom Army.

Nanna Toad held up her hands imploringly. “Please, I beg of you…Spare the children!”

The Koopa Troopa laughed heartily. “Ha ha! Maybe we will…if you say ‘Pretty please!’”

The Goomba sneered. “Yeah! ‘Pretty please, with sugar on top!’”

Mario slammed down on the Koopa Troopa from behind, sending the bully cowering within his shell. Then Mario kicked the Koopa so that he went sliding like a hockey puck, knocking over the terrified goomba, who squealed like a little girl as they both went flying across the floor and smashing into the wall, leaving a crater behind in the perfect shape of their silhouettes.

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Kammy Koopa desperately flew after her master, pleading with him to listen. “Your Viciousness! Remember our plan? You must–”

But either Bowser couldn’t hear her nagging voice above the din of the battle below, or he didn’t care, as he struggled to locate Princess Peach in the chaos. Then, Bowser heard a Koopa Troopa and a Goomba slam into the wall beneath him, and when he looked up, Bowser spotted an equally tempting target: Mario. As Bowser zoomed towards his old enemy, he left Kammy choking on his exhaust. “Mario! You poser! Quit muscling in on my turf! Why can’t you ever catch a hint?”

As the last of the Royal Toad Guards was knocked out, Mario held off a troop of Koopa Troopas on his own, kicking one into a line of Goombas to create a path of escape for the group of widows and orphans. At the sound of Bowser’s voice, Mario met his enemy’s eyes with a silent stare, his face set.

Bowser hesitated. “Ooh! Still doing the strong, silent type schtick? That’s passé! These days, chicks dig a guy who’s emotionally vulnerable and open…I think that’s what my date coach said before I had him thrown in the dungeon, anyway...Woah-ho?”

Ignoring Bowser's bloviations, Mario jumped onto the smashed remains of the dining room table to gain height, then made a leap at Bowser's clown car. But the red-blooded, red-hatted Italian stallion fell short by an inch, his fingers sliding against the smooth surface of the flying machine. Mario tucked and rolled to break his fall, then ran a wide circle through the melee, downing Bowser's soldiers as he sought another way to gain height.

Bowser shook his fist as he spun in midair. "You mustachioed mook! You're gonna' scuff the paint job!"

Old Kammy Koopa finally caught her breath, and managed to wheeze out, almost piteously, "Your Horribleness! The Crown! Remember? The Crown!" She pointed weakly to the Crown of Queen Toadstool, still resting untouched in the middle of the war-torn remains of the dining room.

Unfortunately, Bowser caught sight of another crown, resting on the head of another princess, wearing a telltale, pink ballroom gown. There could be no mistake this time! Bowser nearly fell out of his clown car as he dove forward and grasped Peach under the shoulders to lift her up.

"My peechee-weechee!" As Bowser felt two gloved fists slam into his face in a familiar 1-2-3 combo, he dropped Princess Peach, feeling ringing in his ears along with a strange sense of deja vu. "Ow! Where did you learn to do that?"

Peach stepped lightly back from her unwanted suitor, before dashing to a decorative suit of armor to pull a sword from its sheath. "Daisy's been encouraging me to take up boxing. Though to be honest, I much prefer fencing."

Bowser shrugged. "Oh, come on, Peachy-keen, we both know how this works. I'm basically invincible, even without a power up. So you play hard-to-get, but we both know that eventually–"

Swallowing a red mushroom from the dinner table, Mario leapt into the air, knocking Kammy Koopa off her broomstick as she tried to intercept him. Bowser was finally in reach! The mushroom's power activated, doubling Mario's height and muscle mass, just as his boot landed on Bowser's skull.

Bowser's nose slammed against the edge of his car, leaving him with a bloody nose. "Argh! No fair! You guys always gang up on me!" whined Bowser, as his overwhelming army of loyal minions ganged up on his enemies.

Smoke flared from Bowser's nostrils. "It's not fair! Why don't I have someone by my side to help me out of a jam? Someone I can rely on?"

Kammy Koopa's arthritic bones trembled as she picked herself back up from the floor. "Lord Bowser! The plan! You must seize the Crown of Queen Toadstool in order to–"

With a roar, Bowser turned on his wise counselor and blasted her with his fiery breath. “Silence, crone! Can’t you see I’m expressing my deeply felt needs and my own personal truth here?”

Kammy swayed back and forth dangerously, before coughing up a puff of smoke. “Yes, m’lord!”

As the wizened witch slumped forward and collapsed, Bowser caught sight of the ancient crown in the midst of the sound and fury of battle. “Ah! The Crown of Queen Toadstool! Kammy, you dotard of a do-do, how could you forget?”

Peach lunged for Bowser, only for him to twist away, the blade glancing off his shell. “Mario? Stop him! He’s up to something!”

Still feeling the strength of the mushroom’s power, Mario grasped Bowser’s vehicle in both hands, and to Bowser’s annoyance, Mario was strong enough to keep him from flying off.

With a sly grin, Bowser pressed a red button labeled “Do Not Press.” (Beneath the label, a hand-written sticky note added: “That means *you,* Junior! Love, Daddy.”) An ejector seat launched him into the air. Without Bowser’s weight, the clown car jerked forward, taking Mario by surprise and knocking him off balance.

Bowser’s trajectory sent him crashing into the pedestal displaying the ancient crown, but he arose unscathed, holding the prize in his claws. “Fools! I don’t need to marry Princess Peach to seize control of the Mushroom Kingdom anymore. You see, I’m something of a geek about the ancient lore of Mushroom Kingdom, just a hobby, you understand. And, wouldn’t you know it, the first Queen Toadstool was a powerful enchantress? And all of her magic was stored in her Crown. That’s why it was hidden away! For as it is written, he who wears the Crown, will gain the power of Queen Toadstool, and, by right of conquest, the entire Mushroom Kingdom!”

As the Crown began to glow with magical light, Bowser held it aloft above his head. In horror, Mario and Peach both made a mad dash towards him, only to trip over something: Luigi and Daisy, still in one another’s tender embrace.

Covered in lipstick kisses, Luigi snapped his head up, taking in the scene around him. “Oh! I knew we forgot something important!”

Bowser guffawed, as he slammed the crown down over his skull with force. “Ah, don’t worry Peach-fuzz, I’ll still have you once I’m your rightful King!”

A radiant light erupted from the crown, engulfing Bowser in pink flames that shot upwards to the sky, ripping a hole through the stone ceiling. Everyone, friend and enemy alike, shielded their eyes in terror, as Bowser’s deep, booming, hideous laughter rose over the rushing whirlwind.

Then, as the flames dissipated, Bowser’s voice cracked. “Bloody asthma!” He laughed again, but this time, it was different. Bowser’s laugh was high-pitched, almost musical. “Bow before me!

I am Bowser, Queen of the Koopas! …Kaff! Um? Pardon me, I meant King, of course! I am Bowser, Queen of Mushroom Kingdom!”

As he tried to introduce himself as “King of Mushroom Kingdom,” only to instead hear the word “Queen,” Bowser felt his throat, then looked down to examine himself. He was dressed in an elegant, black ball gown, and his hands had too many fingers.

No one spoke. Before them was a beautiful woman, whose face and blond hair gave her a striking family resemblance to Princess Peach. But her eyebrows were thick, her teeth and nails dangerously sharp, and she had a turtle shell and tail.

Peach lifted her sword, gritting her teeth. “Bowser? What’s your idiotic scheme this time? What’s the point of that silly disguise if you’re going to announce yourself?”

Daisy struggled to disentangle herself from the dog pile, blushing as she realized she and Luigi had been distracted from the brawl. “What disguise? Woah! Who’s she? Do we need to kick her butt?”

Peach gestured her sword, annoyed. “Daisy, that’s just Bowser! Don’t be fooled! He must have gotten Kammy to put an illusion on him or something!”

Daisy pointed desperately. “Peach! Watch out!”

Seeing an opportunity, Bowser dove for Peach’s sword arm and wrested the hilt from her grasp, then grasped Peach around the waist, planning to pick her up like he always did. Mario leapt up to intervene, but before he could…

“Hiyah!” Peach used a judo throw to toss her assailant to the ground, with such ease, it surprised even her.

As Bowser lay on the ground gasping, Daisy pumped a fist. “Atta’girl, Peach! A perfect ippon-seoi-nage! Just make sure you pay more attention to your surroundings next time. You totally let him sneak up on you!”

Peach’s crown bobbled dangerously, as Daisy slapped her firmly across the back. Annoyed, Peach was about to chew Daisy out, but at the sight of Daisy exuberantly holding out her fist, Peach finally cracked a smile and daintily shook Daisy’s fist in her hand.

Daisy snorted. “Okay, Peach, next training session, we teach you the art of the fist bump!”

Mario scratched his head, and now that the battle was over, finally broke his stony silence. “But…how did you do that, Princess? Bowser weighs over a ton. An illusion shouldn’t change that!”

They all turned to look as Kammy Koopa lifted her head from the floor to wheeze. “Oh no…The Crown’s magic. The ancient scrolls said that it contained all the power of the first Queen of the Mushroom Kingdom.”

Groaning, Bowser lifted his head from the ground. “Yeah! He who wears the crown shall become King of the Mushroom Kingdom! That’s how you translated it!”

Kammy Koopa gulped. “Well, King…uh, Koopa, The ancient language mentioned a ‘Queen of the Mushroom Kingdom.’ I assumed from the context that the magic conferred the right to the throne upon the wearer… But now I’m wondering if…”

Bowser looked down, finally registering his magnificent breasts for the first time. Strange. All this time, he’d wanted to touch boobs, and now here they were, and they were horrible! “You turned me into a woman? Change me back, right now, Kammy!” Steam billowing from his nostrils, Bowser crawled toward Kammy Koopa on all fours and shook her, his hair blazing from blond to vivid red, and his pale skin darkening to a golden brown similar to his old scales.

Kammy’s head rattled like a cowbell. “But, my lady…uh, Your Ferociousness! I don’t possess such magic! The Queen of the Mushroom Kingdom was the greatest enchantress of the millennium.”

Seething, Bowser dropped Kammy and yanked at the crown on his head, only to find it stuck tight. Pulling until veins appeared on his arm muscles, Bowser yanked the crown off his skull. With a soft, “Pop!” Bowser expanded into his original, macho, turtleish self. “Ha! That was easy! The King is back, baby! Now, forget this stupid thing, I know what I really want!”

Tossing the crown aside in disgust, Bowser trundled towards Princess Peach, knocking Mario to the floor with a single flick of his finger. Grasping Peach around her trim, dainty waist, Bowser ignored her adorable little screams and lifted her up like a toy. As he turned to retreat, he found himself face-to-face with Mario, who had scrambled back to his feet ready for a scrap. Finally, things were getting back to basics. Bowser knew this was what he was good at. He never should have listened to Kammy’s conspiracy theories about that stupid–

Behind Mario, Bowser saw the crown float into the air, and shoot towards his face like a bullet. Just as Mario’s fist sunk into Bowser’s gut, the crown flew back into place on Bowser’s head, and with a poof, Bowser turned into a woman again. For the first time in his life, Bowser felt how hard Mario could really punch.

“Mario!” squealed Luigi as he rushed to Daisy’s side. “You hit a woman! What would Mama say?”

Mario paled as he watched Bowser writhe on the ground at his feet. Instinctively, his blue collar Italian family-values instincts kicked in. “Mamamia! I’m so sorry, ma’am! I didn’t mean to…Wait! That’s Bowser, Luigi! That’s not a woman…I think.”

Bowser rolled on the ground a couple times, rasping. “Kammy! Fix this!”

By this point, Kammy had crawled back to her broom, hoping to make a tactical retreat unnoticed. “Oh! Yes, my Lord! It seems that the Crown has some unexpected properties. It was supposed to act as a sort of magical, legally binding contract. I’ll just…hop back home to my library and see what my research can turn up. Princess Peach, I hope you won’t mind hosting our beloved King here, for a day or two. I’ll be back to pick you up just as soon as I’ve found something! Toodle-loo!” Kicking her broom until it sputtered into gear like a motorcycle, Kammy zipped into the sky and out the giant hole left in the wall.

Bowser’s eyes snapped open. “Magic? Of course! I have all of Queen Toadstool’s magic! Gwahaha-har! Feel my wrath! Hocus Pocus! Abra, Kadabra, Alakazam!”

Mario, Luigi, Peach, and Daisy all leapt into battle stances. Sparks flew from Bowser’s fingertips as he made a speed run through the list of every magic phrase he knew, desperate to activate the power of Queen Toadstool.

“Open Sesame! Wingardium Leviosa! Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Da! Bippity Boppity–”

BOOM!

With a blast like a rocket, flames leapt from Bowser’s palms, sending him shooting backwards and straight to the stone floor with a crunch.

Mario took a careful step forward to examine his old foe, who was out cold, his eyes spiraling. Mario picked Bowser up in his arms as easily as he’d ever scooped up Peach. “I suppose we should put him…her? …Under arrest?”

Peach flashed a delightful smile, stepping forward gracefully, with royal poise. “Please, Mario, allow me! Oh, Bowser?”

As Peach softly took Bowser’s hand in hers, the former King (now Queen) of the Koopas shook his head to clear his vision, and answered only with an exhausted grunt. “Wuh?”

To everyone’s surprise, Peach rolled back her head and laughed a deep guffaw. “Mwa ha ha! Oh, Bowser, darling? Prepare to be kidnapped by me, the evil Peach, Princess Toadstool of Mushroom Kingdom!”

Bowser smiled stupidly, before falling into a stupor. “Peaches! You’re kidnapping me? That’s diabolical! I’m so…proud!”

Peach bent down to plant a kiss on Mario’s nose. “Thank you for humoring me, Mario, dear. You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to do that!”

[End of Chapter I]

[Author's note: Oops! Did I title this chapter as *Bowser's Princess Lessons*? Silly me! From now on, it's actually *Bowsette's Princess Lessons!* Gotcha!]

Bowsette's Princess Lessons:
Chapter 1.5: The Absolutely Necessary After-Credits Gag
By Yu May

"Wow! What a great episode! I wonder what will happen next?" cheered little Yu May as she sat in front of the TV, finishing the last of her cereal. This is what Saturday mornings were meant to be! But as the credits played at the end of the Super Mario Bros. cartoon, she was surprised by a jarring cut. "Huh? An after credits scene?"

The handsome, trustworthy face of Captain Lou Albano filled the TV screen, dressed in his red Mario hat and matching overalls. "Hey, paisanos! It's me, Captain Lou Albano! Today, you saw Princess Daisy perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation, or CPR for short, to save her special friend Luigi!"

The camera zoomed in to show Captain Lou's urgent expression. He pointed his index finger, conveying all the masculine authority of Uncle Sam and Smokey the Bear combined. "Be like Princess Daisy! Ask your parents to sign you up for a certified CPR and First Aid class! You can help save someone's life!"

Throwing a billowing, yellow superhero cape across his shoulders, Captain Lou Albano ran with his arms outstretched, and flew into the air like the real-life Superman he was. "The more you know!" sang Captain Lou Albano, as a 3D graphic with the same words came flying in behind him like a shooting star, in all its 90s CGI glory.

Still in her Mario pajamas, Yu May stood and saluted the television. "Yes, sir, Captain Lou Albano!"

[End of Chapter 1.5]

Bowsette's Princess Lessons
Chapter II: The Woman in the Mirror
By Yu May

"Oh, Bowser, you're the turtle of my dreams! I'm so lucky to be marrying you!" squealed Princess Peach, trembling with joy in her virginal, white wedding dress.

Bowser heard her voice as though it was from a galaxy away, yet here was her dainty little hand in his, awaiting the wedding ring. "Peach, my love, my Queen, with this ring, I thee wed!"

Just before Bowser could put the ring in place, Peach delicately lifted her ring finger, as if playing keep away from the wedding ring. "Oh, Bowzee, silly! You have to read your vows first! You did remember to bring them, didn't you?"

Bowser felt butterflies launch a nuclear warhead in his stomach. "Hmm? My vows! Why of course I have them…right here in my tuxedo jacket…"

Bowser pulled a stack of papers, and cleared his throat, only to discover they were in fact the rough draft for the book report he forgot to turn in ten years ago, during his senior year at Koopa Tech. "Oh no! Without this, I can't graduate! They'll take away my bachelor's degree! …Uh, Professor Kolorado? Are you here? I need to turn in my assignment!"

In a panic, Bowser stomped away from the altar, only for Peach to stop him, her voice deepening. "No, darling! I've waited so long! Quickly, say your vows before that fuzzy-lipped simp Mario shows up and spoils everything! You must have your vows somewhere?"

At the sight of his true love, Bowser melted. "Of course! For you, my perfect Peachie-Pookie, I would even sacrifice my degree in Pre-Modern Mushroom Kingdom Art and Poetry! Now, as for the vows, I recall I put them in my pants…pocket?"

Bowser reached for the back pocket of his pants, only to discover that he had forgotten to wear pants!

"Hey! The emperor has no pants!" cried a small Goomba child, and everyone laughed. Over the din, Bowser caught the unmistakable sound of two, terrible, wussy Italian accents. Mario and Luigi were doubled over in fits of giggles.

"Look, Mario! Bowser's pants have gone, 'Bye bye! Ha ha, Arrivederci!'" howled Luigi!

Mario wiped away tears, between gasps! "Yeah, Luigi! If I were his pants, I'd probably say, 'So long, Gay Bowser!'"

Steam billowed from Bowser's nostrils. "Hey! No fair! Do you know how hard it is to find 10XL pants, with holes for a tail?"

“Bowser…you need to wake up…now!” whispered a strange, faraway voice, right in Bowser’s ear.

The King of the Koopas flinched, and turned to discover Peach was the speaker, only something was wrong. Her eyebrows were thicker now. “You…you’re not my Peaches! Who are you?”

The not-Peach flashed a wicked, shark-like smile. “I am you, of course!”

As the former bride-to-be opened her mouth, Bowser felt fear like he’d never known since he’d escaped from his ex-wife. “No! Stay away from me!”

The horrible bride cackled as she grew larger. “Wake up, you fool!”

Bowser tried to run, but his legs only moved in slow motion. He was floating closer and closer to her wide open jaws. She was going to devour him alive!

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Bowser shot up, feeling something large catch in his throat, gagging him with a burning, bitter taste. Slamming his chest, he hacked until it came up, and spat out a green mushroom, which bounced with a wet slap against the floor. His head was throbbing, and he thought he heard phantom musical notes ringing inside his skull.

Groaning, Bowser examined the thing that had nearly choked him. It was a 1-up Mushroom?

A short, female Toad with pink clothes and ponytails gasped. “Thank goodness, I was worried there for a second. She…uh, *he* must have his head harder than I thought!”

Bowser didn’t know Toadette by name, but he dimly remembered shoving her out of the way once or twice during his previous attempts to kidnap Princess Peach.

Another voice snorted. It was Mario! “Hmmph! Waste of a perfectly good Life Shroom, if you ask…watch out, Toadette!”

Still seeing stars, Bowser lunged forward, only to smack his face against sturdy iron bars. Mario grasped the young woman by the shoulders and pulled her back from the bars, using his back to shield her from Bowser’s sharp fingernails.

“...Fingernails?” thought Bowser, looking at his own, unfamiliar five-fingered claws. He no longer knew the back of his hand!

A husky female voice chimed in, and Bowser noticed it was Princess Daisy, “Are we even sure this bimbo is Bowser? Maybe that crown magic did some weird time-travel, inter-dimensional distortion baloney?”

Resting his aching skull against the bars, fighting back the urge to retch, Bowser twisted to find the speaker. “Huh? Princess…Doozie? Ugh! Why is the tomboy here? I *hate* tomboys!”

Still in the surreal mental state between dreaming and wakefulness, Bowser felt his throat, not recognizing his own voice right away. He was still a woman? But no, that was just a terrible nightmare! He’d woken up to find it was his wedding day to Princess Peach! …Hadn’t he?

The headache, the awful taste in his mouth, the heavy weight on his chest…it was all too much!

With a groan, Bowser pulled his head away from the bars of his cell, spotted a green toilet, and stumbled forward to puke into it, though not in time. “Blarg! Puhtooie!”

The contents of his stomach spilled on the once-pristine stone floor, but he managed to get a single drop of spittle into the toilet. Bowser turned and spotted a cozy looking fold-out bed. Only wanting to end this nightmare and return to his beautiful dream, Bowser stumbled forward and collapsed onto the bed.

After all, if he was in dream-world, going to sleep would get him back to reality, right?

“I’m…a genius…” gasped Bowser as he pressed his face into the pillows. But it didn’t work. Instead of finding himself in the tender bosom of his newly-wed wife, Bowser’s brain finally woke up.

With a groan, Bowser buried his face in the pillow, perfectly aware that there was no escape from this nightmare, but entirely too exhausted to face it. “Five more minutes, Mommy…” he whined.

Princess Peach ignored Bowser’s fussing, and turned her attention to her friends. “No, Daisy, I’m pretty sure that’s our Bowser! That’s how he introduced himself…though that bit about being Queen of the Mushroom Kingdom was suspicious. Luigi, apart from Mario and myself, you’ve had the most experience dealing with Bowser. What do you think?”

Luigi blushed, tickled to have Peach compliment him. Daisy noticed and beamed, happy to see him so happy.

Luigi straightened his posture and coughed, importantly. “Well, your highness, we know Bowser’s used some cunning tricks in the past…there was the time he had his twin brother fight us, remember that Mario?”

But Mario didn't take his steely gaze off of Bowser for an instant. "It's definitely Bowser, Luigi. I don't know what the trick is. Maybe it's something like the magic paintbrush Bowser Jr. used to impersonate and frame me, but whatever it is, I'd know that meatball anywhere."

Bowser growled once, before remembering his escape plan to fall asleep.

Peach examined Bowser pensively. "I agree, Mario. But even the magic brush couldn't produce an illusion that perfect. It's got to be the crown, but why hasn't the effect worn off?"

Luigi stroked his chin. "Maybe it's like a power up?"

Daisy slammed her fist into her open palm. "Think if we work him over a bit, he'd go back to normal?"

Toadette's eyes went wide with awe. "Ooh! A new power up? Your highness, may I volunteer to test it? If it can make Bowser look so…pretty, imagine what it could do for one of us?"

Bowser groaned with humiliation at being reminded of his unwanted feminine assets.

But Peach only shook her head. "Thank you, Toadette. But I can't let you take that risk. The crown is suspicious enough, even if you could get it off that monster's ugly head."

Bowser moaned with sorrow at hearing his darling bride-to-be refer to him as a monster, lifting his head from the pillow. "Peechee-chan! That's no way to speak to your husband! You're supposed to love, honor, and obey me!"

Daisy snapped, and rattled the bars of Bowser's prison. "Can it, you pig! You have some gall, after all you've done to Peach? Why I oughta' take you across my knee, and–"

Daisy's hair stood on end as she watched Bowser lift his head up from the pillow with a snarl and charge at her, but Daisy didn't back away from the prison cell, nor loosen her grip on the bars. "Yeah! Bring it, ya' floozie!"

Daisy pulled back her fist, ready to aim a punch through the bars right at Bowser's chin, but before she could, she felt two, lanky, green arms wrap tightly around her torso and pull her away from the prison door. "Hey! Gid'off! Lemme' at her!"

As Bowser flailed his arms through the bars, desperate to claw at Daisy, Mario caught Bowser by both wrists and the two struggled for supremacy. Bowser tried to press forward, used to being able to easily knock aside brick walls, let alone Mario, but Mario's grip felt like a vice. With a snarl, Bowser suddenly pulled back, freeing his arms. Mario caught himself roughly as Bowser pulled him off balance. The two mortal foes made an immediate mental calculation. Despite his feminine form, Bowser was still well-muscled, but it was nothing like his former brawn. Bowser and Mario were now equally matched, at least in raw strength.

As Daisy flailed, she thrust her elbow back and caught Luigi flat on the nose. “Oh! Luigi? I’m sorry. Did I bloody your nose? Oh no, it *is* bleeding! Poor baby!”

“Daisy? She…he…Bowser was gonna’ scratch you! I had to–”

But before Luigi could finish stammering out his answer, Daisy produced a handkerchief and forcefully pinched his nose to stem the bleeding. “You were worried about me, Weege? That’s so sweet! …But, don’t worry, I can handle that bully! Say, Toadette? Hand me the key to the prisoner’s cell, and cover your eyes. This will get ugly!”

Princess Peach gracefully, but assertively, intervened. “Thank you, Daisy, but I’d like to be the one to handle this bully...alone.”

Daisy paused to process this information. “Oh! Yeah, I respect that. He’s *your* bully. This is your chance to face your fears! Cowboy up! Earn your spurs! Well, I get it, and you got it! I won’t interfere in an affair of honor!”

Peach exhaled, then curtsied to Daisy. “Thank you for understanding, Daisy.”

But as Peach turned to face Bowser, she felt Daisy land a firm, reverberating slap across her rear end. The force of the smack made the bustle beneath Peach’s dress wobble dangerously. Daisy flashed a toothy grin. “Go get ‘em, champ in the making!”

Daisy was so excited, she waved her hand in a dramatic gesture of encouragement, only to realize she had released her pinch on Luigi’s bloody nose, and fumbled to stem the bleeding again.

Peach blushed, hoping Mario hadn’t seen that, and also half-hoping he had. “Thanks, Daisy. I always appreciate your…enthusiasm!” And Peach meant it, sincerely.

At this, Mario finally stepped back from his death-stare contest with Bowser. “Princess? You can’t go in there with that monster! Don’t be fooled by his womanish…wiles. He’s as bloodthirsty as ever!”

“Don’t worry, Mario, dear. I have something I need to say to Bowser, but there's no need to say it with my fists.”

Peach glanced back, hoping Daisy would resist the urge to declare herself to be Peach’s boxing coach again. Thankfully, Daisy was now too distracted by nursing Luigi’s wounds to notice. “Poor wittle Weegie! Were you going to fight Bowser, to protect me? Don’t you think I can fight my own battles?”

Luigi fought to speak, despite the clotted blood stuffing his nose, “Buh, I had to–”

“That’s so romantic! You knew Bowser could rip your arms off and beat you to death with them, but did that stop you? No way! You were ready to die a gruesome, painful death for me! That’s what I love–uh, like about you, Luigi! People think you’re a sniveling, fraidy cat, but what do they know? You may have noodly arms, but your real strength is in your heart, where it counts! …Uh, better stop trying to talk, Weege…Wow, you’ve lost a lot of blood!”

Satisfied, Peach decided to leave Daisy to tend to her patient. With royal grace, she placed a hand on Mario’s shoulder, and gave him a glance that said more than words ever could. She was thanking him for all he had done, reminding him that she needed to face her foe alone, and promising him that she would be careful, all at once.

Mario nodded, and stood aside, though he still kept both eyes on Bowser.

Peach’s throat felt dry as she tried to get her prisoner’s attention. It took an effort not to stutter. “Bowser!”

As Bowser turned his attention from Mario to Peach, the Princess saw the animal rage in the former King’s eyes. The second Bowser laid eyes on Peach, his face melted to a simpering, salivating smile. It was only more haunting to see that look on a face that so closely mirrored her own. Despite Bowser’s new, feminine appearance, Peach felt the same fear she always felt when Bowser kidnapped her.

If anything, Bowser terrified her more when he was acting like a love-sick puppy. His fiery rages put the fear of God into his minions, but over the past few years, Peach had learned the performative tantrums were mostly for show. She’d even learned to sympathize with Bowser somewhat, but not because she held any delusions that he was secretly a nice guy, deep down.

Deep down, Bowser was still just a bad guy. But he was the kind of bad guy who could occasionally be reasoned with, or cajoled, or cowed.

Bowser pursed his beautiful, luscious lips. “Peachie, Baby! You’re not going to keep me here forever, are you? I have a wonderful honeymoon planned! I got concert tickets for Tokyo Cuban Boys Jr.! You said you liked Latin Jazz, remember, when we went to the beach?”

“You mean when your son tried to frame Mario for vandalism, and kidnapped me, all because you lied and told him that I was his mother?”

Bowser twiddled his thumbs sheepishly. “That was not my finest dad moment, I’ll admit. You have to understand, I was under a lot of stress at that time due to the divorce proceedings. I just wanted a sort of…father-son bonding experience! But I finally did tell him the truth, that you’re not his *real* mama, just his future step-mama! So you see, it was more of a little white lie! ‘Honesty is the best policy!’ as I always say! Unless you’re dealing with enemies, in which case lie for all your worth, but you’re not my enemy, Peach!”

Suddenly, Bowser's apologetic manner evaporated as he clawed to reach Mario. "I'll tell you who the real enemy is! It's Mario! He's the one who always spoils our happily-ever-after!"

Sensing that Mario was ready to spring into action, Peach took a single step between Bowser and Mario's line of sight, trusting Mario to keep his cool. "No, Bowser. That's not true. Mario is my…my dear, dear friend. Why can't you see that? Can't we be friends, too, Bowser?"

Peach heard Mario's intake of breath. She knew what he was thinking. Offering friendship to Bowser? Was she crazy? Peach was wondering the same thing about herself. But she prayed that Mario would give her time to work through her argument.

Mario's mustache trembled in fury, but he didn't interrupt. He didn't trust Bowser. But he trusted Peach.

Bowser's initial wild rage cooled, replaced by the cold-blooded hatred that he reserved only for blue-collar, Italian immigrants that got in his way. "Me? Friends with Mario? Never!"

Peach moved closer to Bowser's cage, forcing him to focus on her. "What about the time King Smithy took control of your castle? Or the time you helped us stop Dimentio from conquering all realities?"

Bowser grinned stupidly. "Of course I remember! That was the time we got married, Peach! Don't you remember? You're my lawfully wedded wife!"

Peach blushed, cursing herself for her blunder. "Bowser, the two of us getting married nearly caused the end of all life in the universe. And, anyway, it wasn't a legal wedding ceremony. Count Bleck wasn't a lawful minister."

"My lawyers disagree."

Peach wanted to scoff, but she resisted the urge to let Bowser goad her. "But that's besides the point. You stood alongside us and fought as our ally, side by side with Mario!"

"That was different! We all had a common foe, but I only cared about getting my castle back…for you, of course. We were not friends! We were…temporary co-belligerents!"

"So, you never wanted to be my friend? Not even a little?"

Again, Bowser switched, from calculating tyrant to fussy little boy. (Or rather, a fussy little boy trapped in the body of a voluptuous, grown woman.) "Gah! Pee-pee, Baby! Stop putting words in my mouth! Of course, I wanted to be friends with you! I want you to be my bestest friend forever! Is that so wrong?"

Peach felt a sliver of hope. If only Bowser could move past his unhealthy obsession with her, he could make a valuable ally to the Mushroom Kingdom. “There’s nothing wrong with that! And maybe we could be friends like that…one day,” she added furtively, embarrassed to have Mario overhearing this. She hated having to dance around Bowser’s big ego, but it was the only way to persuade the brute to do anything.

To Peach’s relief, Mario was composed. He was watching her reassuringly, ready to help the moment he was needed, but patient. “Best friends, forever. The kind of friend you can always count on,” Peach thought silently, looking at Mario, before returning her attention to Bowser.

“But the only way I can ever be friends with you Bowser is if you stop attacking my friends, my people, my kingdom! We’ve been allies before. Couldn’t we just be allies on a more…permanent basis?”

Bowser paused to consider her words, then a knowing smile crept across his face. “Oh, I see what you’re saying. But of course, Peach! Why, for you, I could even be friends with Mario…”

Peach couldn’t find any words. Did Bowser mean it? She was so happy, she could have kissed Bowser (just a platonic peck on the cheek, of course).

But before she could answer, Bowser waved a finger matter-of-factly and barreled over her. “...Once we’re Queen and Queen…Bah! I mean, King and Queen, your Kingdom will be my Kingdom, and I’ll protect our people with my life’s blood! That’s what any honorable Queen like me would do!” Bowser slammed his fist against his heart in a gesture of manly fortitude, only for his fist to bump against one of his massive boobies.

Embarrassed by his verbal slip, Bowser stamped his bare foot. Once, he’d have been able to send tremors through the castle with such a gesture, but now his adorable little feet could only produce a soft slap against the stone. “King! I meant to say King! As King, I’ll protect you forever, Peaches, and your friends too, of course. We’ll need plenty of serfs.”

“No, Bowser, they are *not* serfs. And I’m not talking about marriage. I’m talking about friendship.”

The words quickly passed through Bowser’s ears, without making contact with any of his brain cells. Nevertheless, a 2-watt light bulb still appeared over Bowser’s head as he pressed his face through the bars, hoping for a kiss from Peach. “Oh! I get it! You’re doing the girl flirting thing where you say one thing and mean something else. Like when you said you want us to be ‘allies on a more…permanent basis,’ in that cute little way of yours, you really meant you want to be together, permanently! That means you do love me!”

Peach hid the disappointment she felt from showing on her face. This was how it always went when you tried to reason with Bowser. His irrational idea would just keep rearing its ugly head, again and again.

“No, Bowser, I don’t love you that way, and I never, ever will. But we can still be friends.”

“Yeah, yeah. I see what this whole friendship spiel is. For a while there, I was worried you were trying to put me in the friend-zone.

Peach scrunched her face. Finally, she was in over her head. “Wait? The friend-zone? What’s that?”

Bowser curled his lips with suppressed mirth, like a girl rolling a juicy bit of gossip over her tongue. “Oh, that’s when you lead a guy on for a while, letting him do stuff for you for free, but never actually giving him anything in return. Like you do with that beta male orbiter, Mario. But actually, when you say you wanna be ‘best friends, forever’ with me, that’s really a code word for being more than just normal friends—”

Now it was Peach’s turn to have a lightbulb, and hers was 300 watts. Over the years, she had told Bowser that she didn’t love him thousands of times, and it never once clicked for him. “I’m friend-zoning you, Bowser.”

The room went silent. Even Daisy, who had carefully been wiping the last of the dried blood from Luigi’s nose, was able to pry her eyes away from Luigi’s lovable little face at this news.

Luigi’s face was pale from blood loss, but he turned his head shakily.

Bowser’s wicked delight vanished. He looked like he’d just been sentenced to death. “You’re…friend-zoning me? But I’m the Queen of the Koopas! …Crud! King! King, King, *King!!!”*

In a rage, Bowser rattled the bars and slammed his chest like a Kong, only for his eyes to snap open wide as he felt his tits jiggle and bounce wildly from the impacts. “Argh! It’s not fair! I want someone to have and to hold, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part! What is wrong with you, you psycho witch? Why must you torment me so? Why can’t you want what I want? You know what you are, Princess *Toadstool?* You’re a cold-hearted reptile, with no appreciation for romantic love!”

Even as Peach’s temper flared, she kept her composure. But the commanding, regal boom in her voice was enough to silence even Bowser. “You’re wrong, *Queen Koopa!* One day I will be married, but not to you! The only man I’ll vow to love, honor, and obey is Ma–” Peach caught herself from accidentally shouting Mario’s name, “...My one true love! A good man! Someone who loves and cherishes me as a person, not a video game trophy! And until you learn to show some remorse for all the pain and trouble you’ve caused, you will remain a prisoner! I wish you didn’t have to be alone, Bowser. But until you change, you *deserve* to be alone!”

As the meaning of Peach’s words sunk in, Bowser felt his heart sink into despair, before exploding in a blind rage. He slammed against the iron bars with such force, he chipped a piece

of stone from the ceiling where the bars were secured in place. The prison door held, but Mario had seen enough. Dashing forward, he put himself between Peach and the raging beast, guiding the stunned Princess back.

Never in his life, despite all his kidnapping attempts, had Bowser ever deliberately tried to hurt Peach. She was his idol. But as the dream of his happy, married life with Peach died, he wanted to break everything in the whole world, including her. “I’ll teach you respect, wench! You *will* love me, or you’ll wish you’d never been born!”

Still in shock, Peach allowed herself to be led out of the dungeon, hearing Bowser’s venomous threats echoing through the stone hallways. As Mario slammed the wooden door behind them, Peach had a surreal sensation, as though she’d just been snatched from the pit of hell itself.

“Well, I think that went well,” said Daisy, carrying a white-faced Luigi in her arms.

Daisy’s words snapped Peach out of her reverie, the memory of Bowser’s fury still haunting her. “I’ve never seen him like that. Even at his worst behavior, he was never that…sadistic.”

Toadette held Peach’s hand, partially to comfort her Princess and partially to stop herself from trembling. “Well, maybe it’s for the best! If Bowser understands that you don’t want his attentions, maybe he’ll finally give up and move on with his life!”

Mario huffed. “And do what? Take up crochet? Become a professional go-kart racer? Bowser’s not interested in redemption, Peach. Hasn’t he shown that time and again over the years?”

Peach detected the hidden annoyance in Mario’s voice, but ignored it, her thoughts still preoccupied by everything that had happened. “I know that Mario. But Bowser hasn’t always been like this. I was just hoping I could get through to him.”

Mario started talking with his hands animatedly, which had been his habit since childhood, thanks to his Italian upbringing in Brooklyn. “Then what was the point of offering him friendship? I thought you were trying to trick him into giving you information. Don’t tell me we’re letting Bowser go if he says ‘I’m sorry’ and promises to never do it again! He can’t be trusted! He can’t be redeemed.”

Luigi raised a shaky finger. “Now, hold on, Mario. Mama says redemption is always possible, even for the worst of sinners!”

Mario waved both his hands, “Well, Mama never met Bowser!”

Luigi waved his hands in an equally Italian gesture of annoyance, though not quite as forcefully. “Hey! You sayin’ Mama couldn’t handle a jabroni like Bowser? C’mahn, Mario!”

“Don’t you, ‘C’mahn!’ me, Luigi! I wasn’t saying nothin’ bad about Mama! It’s Bowser we can’t trust!”

Peach watched curiously. She rarely saw this side of Mario, and after all the years she’d known the bros, their peculiar Brooklyn mannerisms still intrigued her. “Knock that off, both of you.”

The brothers’ hands froze in mid-air, both using hand gestures that wordlessly said, “Whatsa’ matta’ wid’ you?”

Peach straightened herself and took charge. “Mario, Luigi, I think you’re both right in your own way. People *can* find redemption. If Bowser wants to turn over a new leaf, I’ll give him every opportunity!”

Daisy raised an eyebrow. “Uh, does that mean you’re letting him go home, scott-free?”

“Nope. Not a chance,” Peach answered bluntly.

Mario sighed with relief, waving his hands to Luigi to silently say, “I told ya’ so,” before Peach gave him a stern look. A little abashed at losing his cool in front of Peach, Mario folded his hands and nodded. Ever since their first adventure together, Mario and Peach had found they could ‘speak each other’s language’ without words. Mario was thinking, *“All right, your highness, you win!”*

Peach smiled as she read the annoyed, but amused look on Mario’s face. “Mario is right. We can’t just blindly trust Bowser. That’d be naive. He hasn’t killed any of my subjects, thankfully, but he’s also put them at risk with his insane surprise attacks far too many times…On the other hand, he’s also a powerful monarch. Keeping him a prisoner indefinitely could lead to war with the Koopa Kingdom. But I promise you, I’m not letting him out of that cell until I’m sure he’s no longer a threat to the people of the Mushroom Kingdom. I’ll have the Council of Elders to help me with negotiations. In the meantime, I’d say we’ve spent enough time on Bowser himself…herself? Come to think of it, we’d better figure out what’s going on with that crown.”

Mario shrugged. “Doesn’t seem so bad to me. Bowser’s weaker now. Now, I can handle him without a powerup.”

Luigi raised a finger, feeling important, then remembered he was still being carried in Daisy’s arms and patted her shoulder to let him down. “Um, what about the magic he used? That was new. What if he figures out how to use the power of the Queen of the Mushroom Kingdom?”

Daisy gasped, then grabbed Luigi by the collar, pressing her forehead against his. “Ooo! I forgot all about that! You’re so smart, Luigi!”

Toadette raised her hand, politely, “Excuse me, but Bowser said he read about the first Queen of the Mushroom Kingdom in some ancient scrolls. Shouldn’t the castle library have some information?”

Peach patted Toadette on the head. “Good idea, Toadette. I bet Toadsworth would know where to find what we’re looking for in the royal archives. But I’ll have to send for Professor Toad, and he could be anywhere on one of his archeological digs!”

Mario snapped his fingers. “An archeologist? That’s it!”

“What’s it, Mario?” asked Peach, Luigi, Daisy, and Toadette all at once.

But Mario was a man of action, not a man of words. He sprinted down the hallway and around the corner, calling behind him. “Kooper and Goombella! They were invited to the party! We gotta’ find ‘em before they leave! Let’s-a go!”

…

Bowser hung his head on the dressing table in his cell, gnawing at the wood in a failed, frustrated attempt to hide his sobbing. Although it had been a cold, dreary dungeon long ago, Peach had taken it upon herself to do some interior decorating, making the cell feel more like a cozy guest bedroom. One of these additions was a framed mirror above the table.

Bowser couldn’t stand to look at the face of the woman staring back at him from the mirror. But if he had, he would have seen the reflected image lift her head to watch him curiously as he cried his heart out. The reflected image of the woman in the mirror watched Bowser with a mix of disgust and amusement.

The mirror-woman revealed every single one of her pointed teeth in a devilish smile. “Well, are you a man, or aren’t you?” she said in a seductive voice, like Princess Peach’s, but much older, and much harsher.

Bowser snapped his head up. With a terrified roar of realization, Bowser thrust his fist into the mirror, shattering it into a spider web pattern. Though the woman’s image was now slightly distorted, she was no less beautiful.

“Why must men always think with their fists?” said the woman in the mirror.

Bowser backed away from the mirror, his eyes wide. “Who are you? Are you a ghost? Or are you an evil magic mirror?”

“No, no, neither. I’m you of course. You only see me in the mirror because I’m a reflection of your subconscious mind.”

“...What?”

The woman in the mirror rolled her eyes. “I am *you*. I’m an aspect of your psyche. I am the yin, to your yang. I am the feminine spirit within–”

“Spirit? That means ghost. *Aaaah!!!* You’re a ghost! I knew I never should have trusted King Boo! Well, you tell that spook I’m done being possessed! I’m my own man, damn it!” Bowser bellowed!

The woman in the mirror hissed. This idiot was ruining all the drama and mystique she was going for. “No, that’s not what I meant! Use your eyes! Do I look like a Boo?”

Bowser’s curiosity momentarily overcame his superstition. “Hmm, now that you mention it, you’re way hotter than most Boos. Heh, heh! Hey, you’ve got *Boo-bees!* Get it? Cuz, Boos don’t have boobies!”

The woman in the mirror was so overwhelmed by the stupidity of this situation, she wanted to gag. Covering her breasts, she coughed awkwardly. “Keh! Fine. Whatever works. Basically, I’m not a boo. What’s important is that you now bear The Crown!”

Bowser forgot all about boobs. “The Crown? Of course! You’re the vengeful spirit of the Queen of the Mushroom Kingdom! You’re mad because your sacred resting place was desecrated, or something!”

The woman in the mirror rubbed her temples. Dealing with this moron was already giving her a headache. She shouted, trying to make herself heard over Bowser’s rambling conspiracy theories about ghosts and aliens. “No! Shut up! I’m not here to curse anyone! I’m here to help–”

“Well, it was those dang Mario brothers who pillaged the Crown from your tomb, not me! If you need to curse someone, curse them!”

“Okay, fine! You know what? I *am* the ghost of the Queen of the Mushroom Kingdom. Ooooo! I’m a scary ghost! Stop talking or I’ll curse you!”

Bowser gasped, then smiled, very pleased with himself. “I knew it! Oop!”

Realizing his mistake, Bowser slapped his palm over his mouth.

The woman in the mirror sighed with relief. “Now, if you really want to curse those Mario Brothers, I’m all too happy to help you. But my…ghost magic is a bit different. You see, as long as you have the crown, I can talk to you, but no one else. And as long as you wear the crown, you have, uh, ghost magic power. But you need me to use the ghost magic power. Ya know, since I’m a ghost and stuff. We have to work together!”

Forgetting to breathe, Bowser hid all sorts of squeals and expletives by pressing his hand tightly against his mouth, before he gasped for air and his tongue moved on its own. “I know what’s next! This is the part where you offer me some sort of deal, but there’s some fine print or a weird riddle poem that means you get to eat my soul!”

The woman held up her hands. “Nothing like that. You already put on the crown. You already accepted the power. You don’t have to use it if you don’t want to. Look, I’ll prove that I’m no threat to you. Take a look at yourself.”

As Bowser looked down on his hands, he saw his pale skin deepen to a golden, bronze tan, similar to his old scales, and a strand of his long hair caught his eye as it darkened from blond to a rich, blood red. “You look different than me? But you’re in the mirror!”

“Right! Despite outward appearances, you’re still you. You’re Bowser. The King of the Koopas. And I’m Bowsette. The Queen of the Koopas.”

Bowser scratched his head. “But, there is no Queen of the Koopas!”

“Don’t you want one? Isn’t that what chasing after Peach was all about? To get yourself a Queen?”

“Well, yeah, but I want Peach. You’re not Peach, you’re just a blond version of me!”

The woman pumped her fists victoriously, “Bingo! I knew we’d get there eventually. I am you. And I am also not you. You are King Koopa. And I am…Princess Koopa. You are Bowser. I am ‘Bowsette.’ And with my help, we can both get Peach, and the Mushroom Kingdom! No demonic contracts! No hidden clauses! No strings attached!”

Bowser’s mind reeled from all this new information. “Bowsette? But you said you were the ghost of the Queen of the Mushroom Kingdom?”

Bowsette froze her victory pose, before she let her arms slump back down in defeat. “No, I meant that…Ugh! Okay, let’s just say I’m the ghost of the Queen of the Mushroom Kingdom, who just so happens to be named Bowsette. I’m not a Boo. I’m not a vengeful spirit looking to hand out curses, nor a demon looking to drag unwary souls to hell. I just want to help you use the Crown’s magic, so that we can both get what we want: to rule and protect the Mushroom Kingdom. What do you say to that?”

Bowsette held out her hand, as if offering a handshake from behind the mirror. Then she noticed Bowser had been picking his nose. “Huh? Uh, yeah, you want a mutually beneficial relationship, yada yada. Look, can we just skip over the exposition dump? You’re boring me.”

From behind the surface of the mirror, Bowsette slapped her forehead against the glass, groaning with frustration. “But that’s what I was trying to—Ack! What’s not to understand? I can give you powerful magic! Don’t you want to rule the Mushroom Kingdom with me?”

Bowser examined a booger on his long, pointed fingernail, licked it experimentally, and finally flicked it away. “And I stay stuck a woman? With a nagging Queen who lives in a mirror? No thanks. Women are weak, and incapable of reason. Anyway, I don’t need magic. I can do all that by myself…with these.” Bowser slapped his palm against the sinewy bicep of his other arm.

Then, with a flash of inspiration, he added menacingly, “And saying you’re not an evil ghost is exactly the kind of thing an evil ghost would say to trick me! No deal! Now, turn me back to my handsome self, or I’m gonna get seven years of bad luck!”

Bowser shook his fist as he approached the mirror, waiting for an answer.

Bowsette shrugged. “Suit yourself. You struck me as a man who isn’t afraid to wield power, but if you’re content to let that red-hatted do-gooder keep stomping on you, and keep taking your girl away from you, be my guest. Whatever turns you on!”

Bowser choked at the memory of seeing Mario and Peach escaping from him time and time again. “That’s not–I’m gonna’ get him eventually! You’ll see! Even if he’s got nine lives, sooner or later I’ll win!”

Bowsette giggled, girlishly. Then pulled out a file and delicately sharpened her own nails. “Sure you will! Well, if you don’t want my help, there’s nothing else I can do. I won’t force you. You can even take the Crown off if you want to go back to your normal self.”

Bowser slammed his hands against either side of the mirror. He wasn’t sure if breaking the mirror would do anything to stop the ghost, and he didn’t want to risk seven years of bad luck, but he was used to bluffing his way through anything by throwing his weight around. “How do I do that? Tell me!”

Bowsette’s eyes went wide with fear for only an instant, before she casually returned to giving herself a manicure. “To return to your normal form, just take the Crown off, gently, and set it down, softly. You’ll be yourself for as long as you want, but you will maintain your connection to the Crown’s magic. Of course, if you want to be rid of the crown forever, that’s a bigger commitment. Since you accepted the Crown of your own free will, with the intent to rule the Mushroom Kingdom, you’ll have to formally abdicate your legal right to the throne. Just say anything like, ‘I no longer wish to rule the Mushroom Kingdom,’ and you’ll sever your connection to the crown forever. There’s no specific set of magic words you have to use. What matters is your intent.”

Bowser felt the crown on his head, and noticed the woman in the mirror followed his gesture. At long last, she was behaving like a real reflection of himself, despite the difference in their hair

color and skin tone. “That’s it? It can’t be that simple! Wait, if you’re Bowsette, and I sever the connection to the crown, won’t that kill you?”

To his pleasure, he saw Bowsette swallow a lump in her throat in the mirror before answering. “In a sense, I suppose it will. Because I am part of you, severing the magic will indeed destroy me. The Crown’s magic will live on, but Bowsette will be no more. Of course, the catch is that once you sever the connection, there’s no going back.”

Bowser pretended to yawn, stretching the muscles of his shoulders and arms. “Works for me. I kill you, leave the crown behind, bust out of here, and have my fun. Sucks to be you, doesn’t it?”

Bowsette perfectly imitated the same gesture in the mirror. “Indeed. But if that is my karma, there is nothing I can do to change it. Still, it’s a pity. I got a good look inside your mind. There’s some empty space, but I don’t mind. Gives me some room to work with. For what it’s worth, I think you’d have made a fine King of the Mushroom Kingdom, with my help.”

Bowser pressed his face close to the mirror, pointing emphatically, their fingers almost touching between the thin panel of glass. “Yeah, well I’ll become King of the Mushroom Kingdom anyway, without your help. You watch!”

Bowsette mirrored this final gesture, before surprising Bowser by breaking away from the standoff and standing up, regally. “Maybe. But never Queen of the Mushroom Kingdom. I’ll leave you to decide your destiny.”

Somehow, she reminded him of Peach, not in her looks, but in her poise. She held her head high…like a queen. But when Bowser looked at Bowsette, he no longer saw a copy of Peach. He saw something new. He saw himself in the mirror. Then, the image turned, and walked away from him, disappearing into the shadows within the mirror.

This surprised Bowser. He was expecting to hear some delicious begging and pleading from the ghost, maybe toy with her emotionally before smashing the crown at the perfect moment. “Well, that’s it? Aren’t you going to try and stop me?”

Bowsette turned. “I can’t stop you. I can only help you. But whatever you choose, it will have been the right choice.” Then she stepped out of sight beyond the frame of the mirror.

Annoyed, Bowser twisted his head to different angles, trying to catch sight of her in the mirror. “Don’t you walk out on me! I’m talking to you, woman!” But as he pulled his head back away, he saw his reflection again. A plain reflection, with red hair, and bronze skin.

“If I ever see that Bowsette brat again, I’ll spank her until she tells me the *real* magic words, then spank her again until she begs for mercy, just for fun.”

With a glance toward the mirror, Bowser saw no sign of Bowsette. “Hmm, not sure how I’d spank a woman in a mirror world, unless…” experimentally, Bowser lifted a hand and slapped his own rump, watching the woman in the mirror. He forgot his own strength, and the slap was enough to make him hop into the air. “Ouch! What am I doing? That mirror woman was probably just part of this nightmare. I’ll just go to sleep and when I wake up, I’ll be marrying Peach again, or…Aha!”

Bowser slapped his own ass again, hoping to take himself by surprise and wake himself up from the nightmare. This time, he aimed for the other cheek, and once again, he slapped with enough force to feel the sting through the thick fabric of his black ballroom gown. “Yow! Okay, this ain’t a dream. I’m really awake!”

Suspiciously, he checked the mirror one final time, wondering if Bowsette was spying on him. Bowser waved his hands, and made faces, just to make sure.

“Boo!” he shouted, turning suddenly, hoping to catch Bowsette by surprise. But it was just a plain, cracked mirror.

“Fine! Be that way! I’ll just–” Bowser sat down on his bed, grabbed at the crown, and yanked at it futilely, before remembering Bowsette’s words.

“Pull it off, gently…set it down, softly.” With a pop, the crown came off, and Bowser expanded to his full girth. Instantly, the bed snapped off the wall under the strain of his full weight, right onto his tail.

“Bwar! Oh, thank Godzilla! I’m me again!” Bowser rubbed his stinging tail as he lifted himself up, struggling to remember the exact phrasing of the magic words Bowsette had told him earlier. He was sure she was lying about being able to use any words he wanted. Typical of a ghost to give him sneaky instructions and watch him yell all sorts of silly incantations. He strained his memory, and found the right words.

“I no longer wish to rule the Mushroom Kingdom,” Bowser thought.

But he couldn’t say those words aloud. After all, he *did* wish to rule the mushroom kingdom.

“Is this the trick, ghost? Want to make me pinky promise to never hurt your little kingdom? Well, fine, I’ll just say it, but I won’t really mean it! I no longer wish to rule the Mushroom Kingdom!”

Nothing happened. Bowser slapped his forehead. “Of course, I do want to rule the Mushroom Kingdom, so I can’t mean it when I say I don’t want to rule the Mushroom Kingdom.”

Bowser sat down cross-legged, both his cheeks still tingling slightly in protest, and examined the crown before him. This was a puzzle. He’d designed clever traps for do-gooders in the past. He could crack this nut! “I can just say I don’t want to be Queen of the Mushroom Kingdom! That’s

true enough!" Remembering that Bowsette had already told him as much earlier, he felt annoyed with himself. Apparently Bowsette wasn't trying to play mind games with him. Or was she?

With a guttural growl, Bowser lifted the crown, thinking, *"I don't want to be Queen of the Mushroom Kingdom!"*

But before he could utter the words, he remembered the force of the magic he'd wielded earlier. That hadn't been a dream. It had been enough to knock himself out! And he was Bowser, after all, so that magic had some punch to it.

"No need to break the connection to the magic right now. It could be useful to bust out of here." Bowser examined his prison. Feeling the bars with his full strength, he had to admit they were well made. The cell could probably hold ten of his strongest warriors. He was sure that not even Bowser Jr. or Donkey Kong could break these bars. But they weren't the King of the Koopas!

As he felt the metal strain, Bowser smiled. It would take an effort, but he could break the iron door anytime he wanted. But did he want to escape now?

Bowser had a delicious realization. "Ah-ha! No one here knows I have my full strength back. I could wait to surprise Mario and tear his mustache off as a souvenir! Or grab that green sap and use him as a hostage to tease Mario. Or wait for Peach to come give me another lecture about love and friendship!"

Bowser rubbed his mighty claws together. "What a wonderful, awful idea! In that case, I'll get some rest and…"

As Bowser's stubby claws fumbled with the chains that once attached the broken bed to the wall, his gaze turned to the Crown. "Oh, well, for any of those plans to work, I'll have to wear the Crown, or they'll instantly realize I'm me again and I lose the element of surprise."

Bowser picked the Crown up, still haunted by the memory of being trapped in the body of a weak, pathetic, helpless little woman. "After all, I can take it off any time I want to. It's my choice."

Closing his eyes, Bowser placed the crown back on his head, worried that pink flames might erupt from the Crown again. But this time, he became a woman in an instant, dropping down gracefully to the floor with a light tap thanks to the difference in height. Apparently the spectacular transformation scene was a one-time thing. Bowser looked into the mirror. This time, his hair was red, his skin bronze. No sign of the blond woman. Bowser decided then and there that he was never going to call himself 'Bowsette.'

“Who’s the man? I’m the man! I’m King of the Koopas!” Bowser said, looking at himself in the mirror. He didn’t like the high-pitched sound of his voice, but at least he wasn’t stumbling over the words ‘man’ and ‘king’ anymore.

Bowser found with strange satisfaction that his nimble fingers could easily reattach the chains of the bed. It would have been a headache with his old three-fingered claws. He didn’t have to sleep on the floor tonight!

As he settled himself on the bed, Bowser realized something was off. “No pajamas? What kind of war criminal doesn’t provide her prisoners with nighttime attire? Who knew that Princess Peach could be so thoughtless and cruel? Dang! She’s sexy!”

Bowser stripped out of his ballroom gown, and found himself wearing men’s boxers with hearts underneath, and no bra. “Perfect! Exactly what I like to wear to bed!”

Bowser stared at the perfect pair of tits just below him, poking them with intense interest. “Wow, not even Princess Peach has a rack like mine! …Ugh! No! Can’t think about breasts! Got to concentrate on escaping.”

Settling himself into bed, Bowser mentally reviewed his game plan. Kammy Koopa would likely be back in a few days, but he had no intention of letting her negotiate his release for him. If the perfect opportunity to break out didn’t present itself before Kammy’s return, he’d insist on being present at the hostage negotiations, and launch his surprise attack. “Okay, this ain’t so bad. I’ll lie in wait, and when the time is right, I destroy all my enemies, and claim Peach as my prize! Just like in a video game!”

With one last glance down at his own, glorious, melon-sized ta-tas, Bowser smiled wanly and drifted off to sleep. “I could get used to this!”

As he snored, he made a loud “Honk! Shoo!” noise, a snot bubble at the end of his nose.

But in the cracked mirror, the blond head of Bowsette reappeared. She watched the sleeping form of Bowser hungrily. “Gotcha’, sucker!”

The image of Bowsette glided away from the surface of the mirror, before lying down on her own bed, exactly like her red-headed counterpart. “What was it you said, Bowser? Ah, yes! ‘Sooner or later, I’ll win?’ …Well, I couldn’t agree more! I think we’re going to get along famously!”

Bowser stirred once in his sleep, sucking his thumb. Then his tan skin faded to a milky snow white, his fiery red hair shifted to golden blond, and he slept soundly.

In his dreams, Bowser was on a throne as King of the Mushroom Kingdom, in his true form. Seated at his left was Princess Peach, attached to his throne by a chain and collar around her neck. But seated to his right…was the Queen of the Mushroom Kingdom.

[End of Chapter 2]

Bowsette's Princess Lessons
Chapter 2.5: Partners For Life
By Yu May

Christine Goombella chewed the rubber eraser of her pencil, straining her eyes against the dim light to make out her chicken scratch in her tattle journal. She was a bright-eyed, rosy-cheeked Goomba girl. But unlike the hordes of overworked, underpaid Goomba mooks that served as Bowser's cannon fodder, Goombella had a fair complexion and fair hair, which she usually kept tied up in a practical ponytail.

"Dear Tattle Log…Well, I shouldn't have worried about today's party being boring! No sooner did we all sit down to reminisce about our old adventuring days with Mario, when someone unexpected showed up behind us! You can imagine my surprise when–"

Goombella felt a breath of cold air tickle her as a faltering voice whispered behind her ear. "Christine? Are you okay, honey?"

Goombella's blond ponytail stood on end. "Whoa, whoa, whoa!"

As Goombella hopped into the air, ready to dive bomb the assassin who had snuck up on her, she flicked on her archaeologist helmet lamp and turned to face her attacker.

Just in time, Goombella recognized Vivian, who shielded her eyes from the bright light. "Kyah! Don't hurt me, Goombella!"

At the sight of the shadowy figure, Goombella fumbled to dim the blinding light. "Vivian? Whew! Sorry, but I thought you were, like, a Ninji assassin or something."

Vivian tossed her pink hair lightly and giggled, as her shadowy form took on a more solid shape. With a snap of her fingers, Vivian produced a flickering candle flame at the end of her index finger. "Easy mistake to make. I'm sorry too. The light was so dim in here, I must have blended into the shadows. The old gang from Rogueport are all pitching in to get a room at the inn for tonight, and we found out Mario's friends from the Star Rod Affair are staying next door! We're thinking of having a boys' and girls' night so we can swap stories! Would you mind?"

Goombella's eyes went wide. "Oh? That sounds rad! Count me in! …Uh, you're part of the girls' night, right? You know you're welcome with us!"

Vivian pretended to pout. "Oh, and miss all the boy's juicy gossip? And what if the boys have a pillow fight without me?" As a living shadow, Vivian's physical features were rather ambiguous, making it hard for people trying to identify Vivian as a man or woman at first glance. When Goombella had first met Vivian, she'd assumed Vivian was a woman based on "her" feminine mannerisms, and that first impression had stuck with Goombella ever since.

But anytime Vivian was questioned on whether he/she was indeed a he or a she, Vivian would only giggle, give the questioner a peck on the cheek, and tell them not to worry about it…man or woman.

Goombella cocked her head, unsure if Vivian was being sarcastic. “Uh…your call?”

Vivian blushed and dropped the teasing hint to her voice. “Don’t worry about it, Goombella. I prefer to sleep in the shadows anyway, but we’re missing our best story teller! You’re not planning to hole up in the reading room all night, I hope?”

Goombella glanced at her makeshift office in the Mushroom Inn’s communal lobby. The book shelves were mostly stuffed with generic books on Mushroom Kingdom tourism. The most interesting one she’d found was titled *The Art of Cooking Delicious Home-Baked Goodies For War* by Tayce T. Toad.

“No! Just want to get my facts straight on everything that happened today. What a ride, right? I was expecting a total snooze-fest, but no sooner did we all sit down and start to talk about the old days when we were all adventuring with Mario–”

“Then a whole, brand-new adventure with Mario jumped out at us?”

Vivian and Goombella both bobbed their heads along with one another, their mutual excitement building. Goombella forgot to use her inside voice. “I know! It was just like when Mario came to my rescue in Rogueport! He hasn’t changed a bit! …Only, we didn’t exactly have an adventure *with* Mario, did we? He was kind of running all over the place fighting on his own, without us…”

Sensing the melancholy in Goombella’s voice, Vivian held back her girlish excitement. “But, Goombella, you can’t blame him for that. It was a surprise attack after all, and we had enemies on all sides. He didn’t have time to reach us with all that was going on!”

Goombella shook her head, embarrassed to realize that Vivian had read her like an open book. “Oh, I’m not blaming Mario! It’s just…too bad. We were, like, so close to getting to fight alongside him again, but, like, it’s like–” Goombella trailed off, feeling a lump in her throat. She had a bad habit of repeating the word “like” when she got flustered.

Vivian nodded. “It’s as though, if only we were a few seats closer, he’d have seen us in the melee and asked us to join him again? If only things could have played out differently?”

“Yeah! You get it! It’s like fate was playing a little joke on us!”

Vivian held up another finger, using her power to create a shifting flame in the shape of Mario and Peach with one hand, contrasting it against two flames in the shape of Goombella and Vivian with her other hand. “Well, that’s one way to look at it. But that’s not the only way to look at it. In a way, we did get to help Mario and Peach again. We fought as best we could, in the

time and place we found ourselves in. The fact that Mario was on the opposite side of the collapsed pillar from us for most of the fight doesn't change the fact that we were all on the same side."

Goombella sighed. "I know that. It's just easy to forget sometimes...Thanks, Vivian. You always know just what to say."

Vivian bowed her head. "Well, I had a good teacher. Blond bombshell. Big, goofy smile. Has a way with words. Practically a walking thesaurus. Maybe you know her?"

Goombella bit her upper lip as she searched her memory. "...Your sister, Marilyn?" Marilyn was blond, and had a goofy smile, though Goombella had only ever heard her say the word, "Guh!"

Vivian surprised Goombella with a peck on the cheek. "I meant you, silly!"

Goombella glanced at her own ponytail. "Oh…Well, I feel totally, completely blond at the moment! Uh, I'll join you guys in a bit. I really have to get my thoughts down before I lose them!"

"No rush! I know you writers need your 'me time!' But if you need a break, come find us. And don't stay up too late straining your eyes!"

Goombella blinked as she examined her dimly lit surroundings. "Yeah, the sun's starting to set! Think we could find a lamp? If I set it right–"

Vivian flipped a switch on Goombella's hat, turning her helmet flashlight back on.

Goombella looked up, suddenly remembering its existence. "...here? Huh, another blond moment. I'm on a roll today, aren't I?"

Vivian sank back into the shadows away from the blaring light, and glided toward the door. "I wouldn't change one hair on your head for the entire world, Chrissy! Have fun journaling, dear!"

"Thanks, Vivi!" Goombella felt much better as she turned back to her journaling, and the words seemed to flow. She recorded everything that had happened from the morning she'd arrived in Toad Town.

Goombella was mostly interested in recording any relevant details about their attackers, planning to write up a report for the Rogueport News Bulletin (moonlighting as a journalist had proven to be a profitable side-hustle while she was completing her graduate degree in archeology at U-Goom).

However, Goombella had learned to always tell a story from the beginning, and found herself writing down all sorts of details about her friends, her Tattle Log functioning as much as a personal diary as a professional journal:

“The party had started out awkwardly when I found myself seated across from Goombario, who was quick to introduce himself as the first goomba who ever helped Mario on an adventure. Whoever planned the party must have seated all of Mario’s old adventure partners together, and I do mean all of them. I actually met Prince Mallow of Nimbus and Geno of Star Road. No one’s seen them in Mushroom Kingdom in years! Anyway, I think Goombario is still a bit salty about Mario not inviting him to Rogueport after their first adventure together…”

As Goombella’s pencil flew, it was as though the whole party was being reenacted on a little stage in her mind’s eye…

…

Goombella was seated across from Goombario, who was regaling the table with a thrilling account of how Mario had barely survived a thousand-foot drop from a flying castle, crash-landing in the backyard of his childhood home in Goomba Village. “So, the point of a good Tattle Log is to keep a record of all your enemies’ strategies and weaknesses, right? And you know Mario is a hopeless book keeper! It was destiny! My parents named me after Mario after he liberated Goomba Village from King Koopa, and now it was my turn to help him! It was the moment I’d prepared for my whole life!”

Goombario’s little sister, Goombaria, rolled her eyes, before flashing a wink at Goombella. “By being a tattle tale?”

Goombario flushed, before fixing his blue cap in a huff. “By *informing* him of what we needed to know about the enemy! There’s no shame in being a good tattler!”

“Tattler” was originally a slang expression for the few Goombas who had sided with Mushroom Kingdom, against the overwhelming army of Goombas loyal to the Koopa King. Over time, it had taken on new meanings, with Mushroom Kingdom Goombas taking pride in their role as informants and record-keepers in the war against the tyrannical Koopa King and his minions. “Tattle Logs” were anonymously published records detailing a Goomba’s adventures as well as crucial intelligence on their opponents. Tattle Logs were widely circulated and discussed by Goombas, eager to advance the cause of the Mushroom Kingdom, and pick up some juicy gossip while they were at it.

“Ooh, just like a spy behind enemy lines. Such a dangerous young man!” cooed Ms. Mowz, batting her eyelashes at the young Goomba.

Goombella hid her annoyance at Ms. Mowz’s shameless flirting. Her relationship with the masked mouse thief had been hostile at first. Things had *slightly* smoothed out between the two after Mowz had agreed to become Mario’s ally. Over time, Goombella had learned to ignore Ms. Mowz’s seduction act, so long as she wasn’t using it on Mario. And Ms. Mowz had learned to not use her seductive femme fatale act on Mario, at least not in Goombella’s presence.

If Goombario had known Ms. Mowz a little better, he would have known she flirted with every man she met. As it was, her compliments gave him the confidence boost he needed to continue his tale. “Precisely, ma’am! And accuracy is everything! I’ve kept up with some of the Tattle Logs published after my adventure with Mario, and they’re just not up to scratch! I’ve heard someone claim that Lakitus threw *pipes!* Isn’t that hilarious?”

Goombella sipped on a Chuckola Cola to hide her nerves. She had made that blunder in her early adventuring days, only for her embarrassing typo to spread like wildfire. Fortunately, she’d written it anonymously, but “Lakitus Armed with Pipes” had become a Goomba in-joke that haunted her to this day. *“Does he know I’m the one who wrote that? Is this his way of torturing me? Or is it just a coincidence?”*

Goombario spun in his chair, his blue cap almost flying off his head as he spotted an old friend enter the dining hall: a Koopa with a blue shell and red scarf. “Kooper! Over here! I saved you a spot!”

As Goombario ran off, Goombaria sighed knowingly, her red ribbon bobbing back and forth as she shook her head. “You’ll have to excuse my brother. Once he gets started telling his old Mario adventure stories, he forgets to stop long enough to take a breath.”

“He seems…nice!” added Goombella.

“Oh, he’s great once you get to know him. And he’s the best big brother in the whole world. Just wink at me if he’s being too much and I’ll tell him to shut up.”

Goombario rushed back to the table, practically dragging Kooper in tow. After making introductions to everyone else at the table, Goombario froze when he turned to Goombella, “And this is…uh, Goombette?”

Kooper beamed and offered Goombella a fist bump. “Goombella! Haven’t seen you since Koopa Tech schooled U-Goom at Basketball. You guys have no hands!”

Goombella returned his fist bump with one of her invisible hands. “We’ll get you back in track and field! When you knock a Goomba down, we get back on our feet! Goooo Goombas!”

Somewhat deflated, Goombario looked back and forth from Kooper to Goombella. “You know each other? But how?”

Kooper gestured to his scarf, which had a stitched patch for the Koopa Tech archeology department. “We’re both students of Professor Frankly. He was a guest lecturer at Koopa Tech to discuss his work on the Thousand Year Door archeological dig.”

Goombario pounced on this. “Oh! I’m going to be a freshman at U-Goom next year, majoring in archaeology! Maybe we’ll get to have Professor Kolorado as a guest lecturer?”

Kooper shrugged. “Not likely. After his misadventure at the Dry Dry Desert Pyramids he doesn’t want to do any archaeological work that involves leaving his office at Koopa Tech. I think the loss of his father hit him hard. Though you’ll probably have some classes with Goombella here!”

Goombario gave Goombella a second look, noticing her university ascot for the first time. “Oh? Let me guess, are you…a sophomore?”

“Well, I’m actually not–”

Goombella fought to find a moment to interject, but Goombario kept right on talking without coming up for air. “I got an academic scholarship, on the advanced track, so I’m planning to take the upper level courses right away!”

Kooper tapped Goombario on the back, “Uh, dude?”

Goombario’s chest swelled. “So, even if you’re taking 201 level courses, I’ll probably see you in class next semester! I can help you out on your homework, if you want! …Yowch!” Goombario hopped on one foot as his little sister stepped on his toes.

Goombella shuffled her own feet. “Well, I’m in the *graduate* program at U-Goom. But I’m Professor Frankly’s Teaching Assistant, so I’ll definitely see you in his classes! …Um, I’d be happy to help you with your homework, too?” She winced as she heard herself utter the last words, realizing too late that it sounded like a retort.

At long last, Goombario was at a loss for words.

They were rescued from the awkward pause when more of their old friends arrived. Goombella felt immense relief when she saw her old travel companion Koops arrive with his fiance, Koopie-Koo, and she was pleased to discover they knew Kooper from Koopa Tech. *“It’s a small world, after all!”* she thought.

Ms. Mowz flirted with all the men as they arrived. Every. Single. One. Though she spent most of her time on a stoic, silent young man with wooden features. Goombella had to strain her memory before recalling his name: Geno, the Puppet Warrior of Star Road.

A cute bob-omb girl with blond hair approached Goombella, gesturing to the two empty seats to Goombella’s left. “Pardon me, do you mind if I save this seat? I’m expecting a date.”

Goombella beamed as she recognized Bombette. “I don’t mind!” Mario had introduced them once, briefly, and told Goombella the story of how he’d rescued Bombette when she was being

held prisoner by the Koopa Bros., a team of four teenage ninja koopa troopas. *"Yet another girl Mario has rescued, without asking for a reward,"* mused Goombella.

Goombario's friend, Spike the Lakitu, bonded with Goombella's friend, Gonzales Jr. the Yoshi Kid, over their shared interest in mohawks. Spike's cloud companion struck up a conversation with Prince Mallow of Nimbus and the matronly cloud spirit, Madame Flurrie, about the politics of meteorology.

Three of Mario's older partners arrived together. Goombella didn't know them intimately, but she recognized Parakarry the Parakoopa, Watt the Sparkle, and Sushie the Cheep Cheep.

Goombella could have sworn she heard Madame Flurrie talking to the empty seat resting between them, before a female Boo appeared out of nowhere, cackling deviously, and nearly scaring Goombella out of her socks. Madame Flurrie bellowed with laughter at the sight, and quickly introduced Goombella to Lady Bow the Boo, a sensationally spirited spirit, who shared Madame Flurrie's love of dramatic entrances, on and off the stage.

With a sigh of relief, Goombella spun in her chair, only for Vivian to appear out of nowhere on her other side, scaring Goombella half to death for the second time in a row that afternoon. With a squeal of terror, Bombette lit her fuse by mistake, and the explosion launched her 30 feet into the air, before she landed right back on her seat. The tablecloth was singed, and Vivian was safely hidden in the shadows, but Goombella was knocked senseless.

Lady Bow had to slap Goombella a couple times to wake her up. "Don't worry, she's not dead yet! I'd know if she was!" giggled the ghost.

Bombette offered a flood of apologies. "I'm so sorry! I can get a bit jumpy…"

Vivian was close to tears. "No, I'm sorry for not announcing myself earlier. Um…are you saving this seat for someone? I can move to another seat!"

"Not to worry! There's another empty seat right here I can save for my date. You and Goombella are old friends! Please don't move on my account!"

Vivian bit her fingers. "Well, you should know that I am a fire spirit."

Bombette glanced nervously at her ponytail, which doubled as an explosive fuse. "Oh…Well, what if you and Goombella just switched seats? Would that be okay?"

Lady Bow and Madame Flurrie chortled with delight, before Madame Flurrie engulfed Vivian in a hug. "Excellent! Get over here Vivian. We'll make for quite a trio! Three spirited ladies, we!"

Bombette bounced in place as she embraced Goombella, "Ha! Well, Goombella and I will be the Blond Bombshell Duo!"

Goombella felt some relief as she switched seats, no longer sitting right next to a slap-happy ghost, though also aware she was now sitting right next to a walking, talking, kiloton blast.

Having finally shaken off his embarrassment, Goombario caught Bombette's eye. "Say, Bombette, who is your date, anyway?"

Goombella wiped the last remains of ashy debris from her face from the earlier explosion. "Yeah, we're short a seat. We need a spot for Admiral–"

"Bobbery!" squealed Bombette.

The whole table went silent as Bombette dove to plant a kiss on the face of a salty old sailor. Like Bombette, Bobbery was also a Bob-omb, but his weather-beaten hat and thick silver mustache could not have provided a sharper contrast. Both were probably older than Bombette.

Ms. Mowz broke the silence. "Why, Admiral Bobbery! You naughty cradle-robber, you! If I'd known you were lonely, I'd have happily volunteered to be your date!"

Bombette's ponytail/fuse started to smoke, dangerously close to lighting. "Hey, back off, sister! And, what are you implying? I'm an adult, and for your information, I asked him out!"

Ms. Mowz curled her tail into a heart shape. "Oh, I would too! But then again, I am a shameless gold digger!"

Bombette's fuse sparked alight. "Gold digger?"

Bobbery's mustache trembled as he scoffed. "Bah! Never mind her, Bombette. Ms. Mowz is that way with everyone. It's part of her charm!"

Bombette flashed Bobbery a look. "Her charm? And what about my charm? Ooh, that does it! Now I'm putting you on the spot, Admiral! Name one thing you find charming about me?"

Bobbery didn't hesitate for a moment. "Your temperament."

With a soft "ftttz" the spark went out of Bombette's fuse. "Oh, I can't be cross with you, Admiral!"

The whole table erupted in cheers for the happy couple. Goombella couldn't stop smiling, even when she felt her cheeks hurt. Everyone who met Admiral Bobbery knew he was a gentle, kindly old soul. But only his closest friends knew he was a widower of many years, and still felt the loss of his wife and true love, Scarlette.

There were days when Goombella thought of Admiral Bobbery, living alone in his old house with his memories, and worried for him. The thought of him having someone special to share that old house with, and make the house into a home again, was a great comfort.

The sound of the laughter caught Goombella's attention. Mario dropped by their table, clapping them each on the back and talking about the old days as if they'd never left one another. It was infectious. No one could be around Mario, and not respect him.

Whenever Mario was nearby, Goombella had a sense that an adventure was waiting right around the corner. He made everyone feel special when he was around them. He always seemed to remember your bravest moments, even when you'd forgotten them, or hadn't even realized that bravery was something you were capable of.

Goombella always felt stupid when she thought about the time she'd picked a fight with a group of rough-neck Goombas who were cat-calling her, but when Mario told the story to raucous cheers, she heard the story in a new light.

An elderly Toad on the Council of Elders, who Goombella recognized as Toadsworth, cleared his throat and began addressing the assembly. Realizing he had lost track of time, Mario casually excused himself and made his way to the head table.

But as she looked at the faces around her, Goombella felt a sudden melancholy fall upon her. She saw the faces of hundreds of people Mario had risked his life to help before he'd even met her, and hundreds more he'd gone on to help after saying goodbye.

For her, the adventure in Rogueport had been a life-changing experience. But for Mario, it was just one adventure among many. To her, Mario was the man who had stood between her and dangerous thugs who had meant her harm, when she was nothing more than a stranger to him. (Sure, she'd hidden behind him and roughly demanded his help, but he had still offered his help valiantly.)

She wondered if Mario even remembered that was how they met. To him, it must have been a completely normal day.

Goombella snapped out of her reverie to find Vivian giving her a knowing look. "It was hard, saying goodbye, wasn't it?"

Goombella caught sight of Mario settling his seat beside Princess Peach and King Toadstool. "I miss those days, Vivian. I miss him."

Vivian adjusted her hair, which usually covered her shining yellow eyes, so that she could meet Goombella's gaze. "I miss him, too."

Goombella reflected about how she'd had a girlish crush on Mario from the moment she'd met him. How that crush had deepened to a love. And the more she understood the man, the more she loved him. "Do you ever wish we could go back, and…say something different? When we said our final goodbyes?"

Vivian giggled. "Sometimes, I think about what I'd do if I could go back…but you know, Mario always pushed us to go forward. And who says that was our final goodbye? We just saw him!"

"You know what I mean, Vivi. When the adventure ended, we all had to go home. Sure, we see him again from time to time, but…it's not like before. I know that you can't turn back the clock, it's just strange, seeing him. Took me right back to Rogueport."

"Are you happy, Goombella, with your life as an archeologist?"

Goombella felt as though she was suddenly awake after dozing off. "Oh! Of course! I love my work, and the students are great! I'm sorry, Vivi, this is supposed to be a party, and I'm totally killing the vibe."

Vivian shook her head. "Don't be sorry. You felt a longing. It can be a sweet feeling, or it can gnaw you up. You can't choose your feelings, but you can choose what you do with those feelings. I should know."

A thought suddenly occurred to Goombella, and she felt like a heel for not asking sooner. "Say, Vivian, are you doing okay with your sisters? They're not mistreating you again, are they? Is Beldam keeping her promise to never hurt you again?"

Vivian stiffened, then smiled. "Thank you for asking. Things are much better now. Marilyn and I have really bonded. Beldam is still her cranky old self, but she can't hurt me anymore. Of course, it doesn't hurt that I'm stronger than her now, and we both know it. But in her own way, she's become a kinder person. I think getting free of the Shadow Queen's influence helped us all see how our lives could be different, especially Beldam."

Remembering the horror stories Vivian had told about her previous life with her sisters, Goombella wasn't sure she was ready to forgive them, even if Vivian already had. But the grace and confidence in Vivian's voice set Goombella's mind at ease. "That's good to hear. But if anything changes, you call me. Remember, you always have a home if you need it."

"I will never forget!"

After sharing a meaningful look with one another, Goombella and Vivian's eyes both turned to find Mario. Peach was offering him a small bite of the cake she had baked for him. Vivian raised her voice just enough so the rest of their friends sitting next to them could hear. "They look so happy together, don't you think?"

Goombella nodded. “They do, don’t they? Makes me feel happy just watching them.”

Goombella felt the pang again, but this time she didn’t find herself wallowing in the thought of what could have been. The past did not exist. She had had an adventure. It had all turned out well. And who knows, maybe there was another adventure right around the corner.

A terrific explosion ripped through the stone wall behind the Royal Table. As the tall stone pillar began to collapse, Goombella saw it hurtling towards Mario and Peach. Pointlessly, they all shouted out warnings, but Mario had already sprung into action. As Mario scooped up Princess Peach and dove to safety with her in his arms, Goombella saw the pillar slam into the ground, separating them from her sight. An army of Bowser’s minions charged through the hole in the wall, and over the sound and fury of battle they could make out Bowser himself flying high into view, bellowing orders.

“We’ve got to help! Those guys will mop the floor with the Toads!” barked Goombella.

Four enemy Koopas leapt dramatically from the smoke and debris on their side of the pillar, each a different color and wearing ninja bandanas: the Koopa Brothers! Slamming a boombox on the ground to play their kickass theme song, the eldest of the brothers launched into his carefully rehearsed monologue. “Mario? Come out and fight, dude! We, the Koopa Brothers, have returned! We have trained day and night, night and day, preparing for the moment we would meet again and exact our spectacular (and long-overdue) revenge!”

The other three Koopa Brothers took up the cry of “Revenge!” before catching sight of Mario’s old adventure partners charging toward them.

“Aw, man!” whined the eldest Koopa Brother, before Goombella’s headbonk attack came smashing down onto his skull.

…

Goombella made a couple final marginal notes before closing her Tattle Log. She was sure some of the information could come in handy later. So what if she missed her chance to fight side-by-side with Mario at the party? There were still plenty of ways she could help her old friends right here and now. Sure enough, Goombella had lost track of time, but she hadn’t missed the start of the girl’s slumber party.

“So, what do you think, girls? Shall we have Vivian and Lady Bow be our spies on the boys?” teased Ms. Mowz, kicking her feet behind her.

Lady Bow laughed wildly. “Gweeah! Heh! Ha! I bet those boys are having a merry pillow fight in their pajamas even as we speak!”

Bombette's fuse started to smolder. "Mmmm. I wish Admiral Bombery would smack me around with a pillow!"

Watt, who was still at the age where she believed boys had cooties, was the most vocal objector. "Yuck! I don't want to hear about their silly pillow fights, or their silly pajamas!"

Goombaria chimed in. "Yeah, anyway, the ones Goombario always wears just have little pictures of Mario all over them. That's it! There's nothing special about 'em!"

Vivian blushed madly at the thought. "Oh, it wouldn't be right. I couldn't invade their privacy like that!"

Sushie, who was a mother herself, shushed the younger girls calling for a spy operation. "Now, now, how would you girls feel if the boys sent a spy over to watch us? Don't you dare make Vivian do your dirty work!"

Madame Flurrie was torn by her memory of her wild, younger days. "Oh! I wouldn't mind being spied on again, just once. Yes, during my long career on the stage, many a time did I catch the wandering eye of a voyeur following me to my dressing room! Ah, I would be cross with the lad who had such pluck. But, in my younger days, it was a simple matter to have my revenge, and spy upon my spy in turn! …But Sushie is right. I can't condone making Vivian do it for us. The vile deed, if it is to be done, must fall to a woman of more experience!"

Ms. Mowz interrupted Madame Flurrie's monologue with a cold chuckle. "Feh! If you're planning to squeeze through the air conditioning vents, I already tried that. You wouldn't fit…even in your younger days!"

Koopie-Koo, Koops' bride to be, put a supporting arm around Vivian's shoulder, before whispering conspiratorially. "Don't let them peer pressure you, Vivian! Though…I am dead curious what my future husband is getting up to right about now. You know, I am Koops' fiance! Suppose I gave you permission to spy *just* on Koops, and *just* for me?"

Goombella sensed that the crowd was close to turning in favor of sending a spy. Goombella wouldn't have minded the silly idea so much if it was anyone other than Vivian being drafted as the spy. But Goombella could tell Vivian was strongly opposed to it. "Vivian, don't listen to anyone else. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do!"

Vivian held both her cheeks. "Thank you, Goombella! Though to be honest…I was a little tempted to try, before any of you said anything!"

Goombella's eyes went wide. "Really?"

As Vivian silently nodded, all the girls started giggling madly, even Sushie, who was still struggling valiantly to be the voice of reason in the room. “Now, now, if I was you girls’ mother, I’d spank the whole lot of you! Ha, ha!”

Ms. Mowz cackled mischievously. “I knew it! We’re corrupting her! Soon she’ll be one of us bad girls!”

Lady Bow, who had teasingly suggested the idea of spying on the boys in the first place, hid her face as she blushed mad red. “Oh, my! I was only joking about spying! I never thought anyone would actually take me seriously!”

Goombella was laughing too hard to argue. This was just what she needed. A silly little adventure to take her mind off the crazy day she had just survived. Goombella was half tempted to volunteer herself for the spy mission. But Goombella’s better nature won out. “All right! That does it! If any of you spy on the boys, I’m tattling on you! So there!”

Ms. Mowz cracked her tail like a whip. “Goombella! You spoil sport! You stool pigeon! You…rat fink!”

Goombella stuck out her tongue. “So what if I am! Can you imagine how horrible it would be if one of the boys tried to get in here while–”

There was a ferocious banging at the door, before it burst open. They’d forgotten to lock it! A shadowy form charged into their room, a man! The ladies all squealed and covered themselves, momentarily forgetting that they were all dressed in tasteful and modest sleepwear, all appropriate for a game rated E for Everyone.

Goombella nearly jumped out of her pajamas as the strange man lunged for her, shouting, “Quick! There’s no time! Come with me, right away!”

She reached for her helmet and shone her flashlight at the intruder, blinding him momentarily and halting his charge.

It was Mario! Happy to see him alive and unharmed, the women immediately forgot their fury, and swamped him with hugs and kisses.

Mario spluttered as every inch of his face was smooched. “Wha? Mamamia! No, not now! Where’s Goombella?”

Goombella’s jaw went slack, before Mario gently pressed her cheeks between his hands. “Thank goodness you’re still here! I need you, Goombella!”

It all happened so fast.

Before she knew it, Goombella was being swept off toward Castle Toadstool, Mario hurriedly explaining something about needing an archeologist, about the fate of the entire Mushroom Kingdom being at stake, and about ancient scrolls. Goombella dimly registered the world around her as Kooper rushed out of the boys' bed room, followed by Goombario, eager to help, and then the whole crew. Mario waved for them all to follow, but as he carried Goombella in his arms, she knew that adventure had come calling for her again.

[End of Chapter 2.5]

Bowsette's Princess Lessons:
Chapter III: To The Library!
By Yu May

The librarian, Litera Toad (friends called her "Litera T."), was having a most unpleasant day. First, that ill-mannered Bowser had spoiled her lunch with his noisy surprise attack. No sooner had she fled to her library to escape the enemy soldiers, then she discovered the explosions that had destroyed most of the castle dining room had also knocked some books off the shelves! The horror! She had just had enough time to put the library in order, when a huge group of people burst in, led by Mario and Princess Peach, rambling on about needing to read the ancient scrolls documenting the history of the Royal House of Toadstool.

Princess Peach had personally promised that all would be set in order once they'd completed their emergency research project. Even then, the only thing that had persuaded Litera T. to let them so much as *touch* the delicate, ancient scrolls was when Goombella mentioned she was a student of Professor Frankly.

For a pregnant moment, Litera folded her arms and tapped her high-heeled toe furiously. "Well, I suppose that old duff must have taught you something! But I don't want all of you crowding the ancient archives. Do you have any idea how delicate ancient papyrus is? The room's temperature has to be strictly regulated! And what about those two Bob-ombs? If one of them so much as sneezes, they could incinerate the entire archive!"

Mario's mustache twitched. The two Bob-ombs in question, Bombette and Admiral Bobbery, glanced apologetically at their fuses. Peach started to protest, not wanting any of Mario's old companions to feel excluded, only for Litera T. to whip a wooden ruler out of her sleeve, faster than most ancient warriors could draw a sword from a sheathe. "Mind your manners, Princess. I can still rap your knuckles if I need to!"

Thankfully, Admiral Bobbery, who was the oldest and wisest of the group, gracefully intervened. "Pardon me, but I don't think I'd be much use to you in a library, Mario. What say those of us who aren't archaeologists retire for the night? Princess Peach, if you have need of us in the morning, you'll find us refreshed and ready!"

"Well, at least someone here has a dose of common sense!" harrumphed Litera T.

Peach sighed in relief. "An excellent suggestion, Admiral! I'll have the Royal Toad Guard escort you all to your own guest rooms."

Litera adjusted her thick spectacles. "Then, who in the group is going to the archives? I have a strict limit of 8 persons at a time!"

Peach bowed demurely, "That should suffice! The group will include myself, Sir Mario, Sir Luigi, Princess Daisy, Ms. Goombella, Mr. Kooper–"

“And me, Mr. Goombario!” squeaked the young Goomba, hopping on one foot as he raised his field journal high.

Litera T. narrowed her eyes at Goombario. “Are you a student of Professor Frankly? You look a bit young to be at university!”

Goombario bit his lip. Technically, he was only an incoming freshman in the undergraduate archaeology program at U-Goom. “Well, uh…”

Kooper clapped Goombario across the back, “Ma’am, I’ll have you know this goomba is one of the most promising archaeology students U-Goom has ever had! I’m just sad Koopa Tech couldn’t steal him away from you!”

Litera T. nodded. “Very well. If he isn’t careful with those scrolls, I’m taking it out of your shell, Young Master Kooper!”

Finally satisfied, the stern librarian escorted Mario, Luigi, Princess Peach, Princess Daisy to the ancient archives. Of Mario’s fifteen companions, only Goombella, Kooper, and Goombario remained with them.

In the archive room, Kooper, who specialized in cartography, busied himself by examining ancient maps of Mushroom Kingdom, carefully drawing a copy and taking notes. “This is incredible, Princess! I had no idea the Mushroom Kingdom once controlled so much of the Koopa Kingdom’s territory!”

Peach nodded. “Yes! In its early history, the Mushroom Kingdom was an expansive Empire. In fact, the same royal family that ruled the Mushroom Kingdom also once ruled Sarasaland, but King Toadstool II divided the lands between his two sons.”

Fascinated, Daisy watched Kooper meticulously measuring out a graph for his map, before snapping to attention at the mention of her home country of Sarasaland. “Yeah, Peach and I are, like, distant cousins or something?”

“Third cousins, once removed!”

“Oh yeah! So you’re Great-Great-Grandpa Chintz’s Great-Great-Great-Grandaughter!”

“No, Daisy, I’m your Great-Great-Great-Grandma Calico’s Great-Great-Grandaughter.”

Daisy squinted as she tried to recall the royal family history classes she hadn’t napped through. “Oh! So, what does that make us?”

“Third cousins, once removed.”

Eager to help, Goombario cleared his throat. “Hey! I found something interesting! These characters are Old Shroomish! It says…‘Hi, Lulu!’”

“Who’s Lulu?” asked Luigi.

Goombario glanced back at the word sheepishly. “No clue. But I can tell it’s a formal name because of the diacritic mark above the name!”

Goombella glanced over at Goombario’s notes. “Good work, Goombario! But that’s not Old Shroomish. It’s, like, a totally different language.”

Goombario scowled. “But these are all Old Shroomish characters! I recognize them from Professor Frankly’s *Intro To Old and Middle Shroomish*!”

Goombella nodded, her inner-geek mode activating. “Correct, the *characters* are the same used in all Old Shroomish texts, but apart from a few words, the actual *language* is different. See how the sentences are constructed? This is *way* more complicated grammar than Old Shroomish.”

Goombario blushed as he realized his mistake. When he’d first met Goombella, her habit of using valley girl expressions had given him the impression she was an airhead. Now he found himself struggling to keep up. As Goombario struggled to remember anything he’d read that could help, Goombella started to chatter. “Princess Peach, this is incredible! Why hasn’t anyone at U-Goom had a chance to transcribe these before?”

Everyone flinched at the sound of Litera the librarian’s ruler cracking against her open palm. “Inside voices inside the library, please!”

Princess Peach folded her arms, subconsciously wanting to protect her palms and knuckles from the fury of the wooden ruler.

Goombella nodded apologetically, then lowered her voice. “My apologies, Ma’am! We’ll try to keep it down! Ahem! Goombario, do me a favor and start making an exact copy of this. We can send it to Professor Frankly for advice on how to translate it.”

Thrilled to have something useful to do, Goombario barely contained a scream of joy. “Eep! Right away, Professor Goombella!”

“Oh no! I’m still just a teaching assistant. Decoding this language could take months, years, even assuming we have a large enough sample to work with. In the meantime, I’ve been scanning the scrolls we have, to find any mention of a ‘crown’ or a ‘queen.’ Princess Peach, Princess Daisy, this is where you could be of most help to me.”

Princess Peach curtsied. “I am happy to oblige, Miss Goombella! Ask us anything.”

Peach turned to find Daisy still fixated on Kooper's cartography project. "Woah! You're so good at drawing, dude! Man, I love maps!"

"Thank you!" said Kooper, without breaking his attention on his task for an instant.

When she felt Peach gently tap her elbow, Daisy jumped into a martial arts stance. "Hiya! I'm ready! Who do we have to kill?"

Daisy stiffened when she felt the librarian slap her sharply across the behind with the wooden ruler. "Lower your voice inside the library, Princess Daisy!"

Daisy felt a single tear welling up, but with a sharp intake of breath, put on her game face. "Sorry, ma'am! Phew! …That librarian of yours is a real battle axe, Peach. I like her!"

Peach delicately directed Daisy's attention to Goombella. "Thank you, Daisy. Now, Goombella, please continue. You have our full attention!"

Not wanting to hurt the delicate scrolls, Goombella flipped through her notebook, which contained all her relevant observations so far. "Well, from what I understand, these scrolls record the entire history of the Royal Family. But there seems to be quite a bit of myth and legend mixed in with the history. I'm trying to sort out fact from fiction. What can you tell me about the first Queen of the Mushroom Kingdom?"

"Well, I was taught that she ascended to the throne as a result of a succession crisis. King Toadstool I died without fathering a son to inherit the throne, so a council of elders was formed, and his eldest daughter was appointed as Crown Princess until the time she could give birth to a son."

Daisy rolled her eyes. "Ugh! So just because she was born a girl, she couldn't be Queen? Why did they have to be so uptight about boys and girls back then? I'm a girl, and my dad says that I can do anything if I set my mind to it, including being a wise Queen!"

Peach shrugged. "It was a different time, Daisy. The first King of the Mushroom Kingdom wasn't just a hereditary ruler. He was a military leader. Back then, a king had to be the type of man who could command respect from an entire army of men, and fight alongside them if needed!"

Daisy started a death-stare contest with Peach. "And we can't do that? Just because we're girls? That's not fair!"

Peach stood her ground. "Is it fair that only men were required to serve in those armies?"

Momentarily, Daisy was at a loss for words. Daisy glanced around the room, as if hoping to find a witty retort written on one of the piles of books and scrolls. When she caught sight of Luigi, her face turned red as a toadstool. "*Why, oh, why did I have to have a brain fart now?"* she thought.

Oblivious to Daisy's dilemma, Luigi stroked his chin. "Huh. Wow, Peach, I never thought about it that way…but, aren't you going to inherit the throne of Mushroom Kingdom?"

"YEAH!!!" boomed Daisy!

"CRACK!" went the librarian's ruler across the Princess of Sarasaland's royal behind.

Daisy felt a shiver travel up her spine, inhaled sharply, and grit her teeth. "...sorry, ma'am…inside voice…"

Carefully, Daisy lowered her voice to a whisper, but she also tapped Peach's chest and gesticulated wildly as if she really wanted to scream at the top of her lungs. "...yeah…you're going to be Queen of the Mushroom Kingdom…but you wouldn't have been allowed to ascend the throne back then…you think that's fair, Peach?"

"I don't disagree with you, Daisy. My point is, in those days, the people of the Mushroom Kingdom believed it was important for there to always be a King of the Mushroom Kingdom to protect them. Today, I have counselors, generals, good men I can rely on…" as Peach caught sight of Mario, standing like a silent statue listening to every word she said, Peach felt goosebumps, "...to lend me their courage. In our day and age, I don't have to charge into battle to be a good Queen. I don't think I'd be able to do something like that."

Daisy caught sight of the librarian out of the corner of her eye, and barely controlled her desire to shout her battle cry to the heavens. "Sure, but just because we don't *have* to fight, doesn't mean we shouldn't be *able* to fight!"

Daisy pulled Peach into a one-armed hug. "And when the day comes that the forces of evil try to destroy you and everything you love, Peach, I solemnly vow to fight side-by-side with you! 'Til victory, or 'til death!"

Peach paused to collect her thoughts. "...Thank you, Daisy. You're such a good friend."

Touched by this display, but also impatient for more information, Goombella interjected. "Princess Peach, you said Queen Toadstool was originally granted the title of Crown Princess. What changed? How did she become Queen?"

Peach extricated herself from Daisy's embrace. "Well, her cousin, Duke Shitake of Sarasaland, claimed a hereditary right to the throne of Mushroom Kingdom."

Daisy raised her hand. “Ooh! I know about him. He was the Big Cheese in Sarasaland before our family’s royal line was established. Shitake was a nasty guy. Before him, Sarasaland was traditionally divided into four minor kingdoms. But he treated all of them like dirt, and tried to force them all under a one-size-fits-all system, where he controlled everything!”

Mario snorted once, but didn’t interrupt.

Daisy inhaled, then pressed a fist against her mouth to stop herself from screaming. “Waittaminnit! I remember now! Didn’t he *force* Crown Princess Toadstool to marry him?”

The room went dead silent. *“Nice and quiet. Now, that’s more like it!”* thought Litera T.

Peach sighed. “That’s correct, Daisy. To avoid a war, the Council of Regents arranged a political marriage between Duke Shitake and Crown Princess Toadstool…”

Mario clutched his arms so tightly, the fabric of his sleeves creaked. “I don’t suppose Crown Princess Toadstool had any say in the matter?”

Peach shook her head. “I don’t know, Mario. My history is sketchy on the details. Political marriages were common at the time. It’s possible she consented to the marriage…”

“And that makes it okay? Marry me, or else? ‘It was a different time,’ after all!” growled Mario.

Peach was taken aback. “Mario? Surely, you don’t think I approve of what the Council of Elders did? Duke Shitake was a mad tyrant. What they did was wrong!”

Still hot under the collar, Mario took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair, but his voice was gentle as he spoke to Peach. “Peach? I wasn’t trying to say you agree. Of course not! You’ve got your head screwed on right, it’s just…irritating. All these wannabe big-shots, *Duke* Shitake, *King* Koopa, pushing people around, telling them what to do!”

Oblivious to the tension between Mario and Peach, Daisy slapped Mario across the back. “Yeah! Good one, Mario! Guys like that need a swift kick in the ass, as my Dad would say! …Oop! But I’m not supposed to repeat that!”

Peach strained her memory to recall more details from her history lessons at Princess Academy. “And anyway, the marriage didn’t even do anything to solve the succession crisis. After the marriage, they never had any children, which meant there was still no male heir…But, Goombella, most of this is standard history. Surely you must know all of this already?”

Goombella nodded. “I’m familiar with the basics. But it’s good to hear it from your perspective, Peach. This is your family history after all. What happened to Queen Toadstool?”

A sly grin crept across Peach's normally stoic face. "Oh! That's why I was always so interested in her story. You see, once he assumed he had full military control over Castle Toadstool, Duke Shitake illegally disbanded the Council of Elders. When Queen Toadstool didn't give birth to a son for him, or bear any children for that matter, he accused her of witchcraft and tried to have her executed. Only she turned the tables on him! You see, Duke Shitake put her in charge of all the household affairs…"

"A woman's place is in the home?" asked Kooper with amusement, still not looking up from his cartography project.

Peach giggled. "Precisely, Kooper! And she used that position to fill the castle staff with those loyal to her father's rule. So, when Duke Shitake attempted his little coup d'etat, he found himself trapped in a palace surrounded by Toadstool royalists!"

Daisy started hopping on the balls of her feet. "Yeah! And then there was some wicked siege warfare! Dad showed me how it all played out on his wargame table! See, the power ups were completely different back then, so to defend the castle…"

Before Daisy could launch into an autistically-detailed description of medieval Mushroom Kingdom war tactics, Goombella intervened. "Queen Toadstool developed most of what became the standard power ups: red mushrooms, green mushrooms, and fire flowers."

Mario's magnificent mustache curled in shock. "Wait, Queen Toadstool *invented* the power ups?"

Peach shook her head. "Not all of them. But she certainly had a hand in those three. Why do you think they're spread all around the Mushroom Kingdom in question mark blocks? We want our people armed and ready for anything!"

Luigi raised a hand, "I'm assuming she won, right? So, what'd she end up doing to Duke Shitake? Did she let him go back to Sarasaland?"

"Hell no!" barked Princess Daisy.

"Ahem!" chirped Litera Toad, folding her arms as she gripped her wooden ruler, and tapping her foot.

Daisy's eyes went wide, and her normally tan face went so pale, her freckles seemed to appear from nowhere. "Oh, my bad…I'll just…"

Daisy meekly put her hands on her knees, presenting her bottom as an easy target. After Litera whacked Daisy across the behind three times, the librarian clicked her tongue. "Tut, tut, tut! That's your last warning, Princess Daisy. You may stand up."

“Yes’m!” squeaked Daisy, wincing. Unlike Peach, Daisy preferred not to wear a bustle under her dress, a decision she was now regretting. Determined to behave like a proper princess, Daisy folded her hands in front of her, imitating Peach’s demure, refined posture. “Shitake was stripped of his title as Duke of Sarasaland, along with his lands. However, Queen Toadstool spared his nephew, Shitake Jr., and approved a marriage between him and her younger sister, Princess Cherry.”

Mario raised an eyebrow. “Approved a marriage? Did she let them marry of their own free will? You don’t think she’d force her own sister into an arranged marriage, after what happened to her, do you?”

Daisy shrugged and looked to Peach, hoping for an answer.

Peach only bowed her head. “I wish I knew, Mario. Most likely, the marriage was arranged for political purposes, but that doesn’t necessarily mean Queen Toadstool forced her sister into the marriage against her will. If it’s any comfort, Shitake Jr. and Princess Cherry apparently had many children, and some of our oldest love poems and romantic tales center on their marriage! I’d like to think they were one another’s true love, even if it began as an arranged marriage.”

Mario resisted the urge to tease Peach, instead patting her on the back. “Never change, Princess!”

It was Mario’s way of silently saying, “Let’s not have this argument again!” As a blue-collar kid from Brooklyn, Mario had never quite adjusted to the medieval politics of the Mushroom Kingdom.

Peach thrilled at the touch, and correctly guessed its hidden meaning. It had been years since he and Luigi had first teleported to this strange land through a warp pipe, and Peach found his stories about “America” and “Constitutional Democratic Republics” every bit as strange. Feeling oddly comforted, Peach addressed Goombella. “Well, Goombella, Goombario, Kooper, I’m sure you know the rest. Queen Toadstool made Shitake II and Princess Cherry stewards of the Throne of the Mushroom Empire. Their first-born son became King Toadstool II, and his twin sons inherited the Thrones of Mushroom Kingdom and Sarasaland, respectively.”

Daisy pointed two thumbs toward herself, and remembered to whisper just in time to avoid the wrath of the wooden ruler. “...And *we* restored autonomy to the Governors of the four administrative wards of Sarasaland! Power to the people, baby!”

“Right on!” added Kooper, holding out a fist to fist bump Daisy, and still not looking up from his calculations. Having finished his copy of the archaic map of the Mushroom Empire, he was now attempting to update it according to a modern knowledge of geography.

Still feeling embarrassed by his earlier gaffes, Goombario looked up from his progress transcribing the mysterious language. The illuminated art depicting knights and shadow

monsters decorating the scrolls was pretty cool, but he wasn't sure how helpful any of it would be. "Yeah, Goombella. But you and I already know all this stuff? What's the relevance? How is this history lesson going to help us deal with Bowser?"

Goombella carefully opened two scrolls of papyri and a thick book to spots she had previously noted. "Simple, I didn't know for sure about Queen Toadstool's connection to the Power Ups. Now that I've heard Princess Peach's account of her family history, I think my hunch is correct. Look at this illustration of a crown. The notes in Shroomish describe it as an early prototype for a Power Up!"

Everyone quickly, but silently, shoved to get a look at the illustration. Even Kooper, who had been engrossed in his cartography, couldn't resist. "And that's a floor plan for the Dry Dry Desert Pyramid! That fits perfectly with where you guys say you found Bowser's mystery crown!"

Goombario whooped in delight as he examined the Old Shroomish characters and found he could pick out a few words. "Woo hoo! And that's an illustration of a Duplighost, and the word 'illusion'! The Power Up transforms your appearance to the likeness of another person, along with letting you imitate their abilities! Just like a Duplighost's power!"

Thwack!

Litera Toad landed her ruler across Goombario's backside. She wasn't quite sure where to aim to land the blow on a goomba's butt, but her guess was roughly correct.

"Sorry, ma'am!" hissed Goombario, mourning the loss of his brief moment of triumph.

"At least it's not me getting thumped on!" thought Princess Daisy.

Luigi pressed his fist against his lips, deep in thought. "But that doesn't explain the firepower Bowser had. If he was just imitating Peach, she doesn't have explosion magic…right, Peach?"

At the news that someone in her library might possess explosion magic, Litera Toad's ruler-hand was twitching, ready to distribute a volley of stinging whacks, even to Princess Peach.

Painfully aware of the ruler, Peach was quick to answer. "No. I don't have that power. Which means it can't be simple illusion magic."

Goombella gestured to another illustration. "Here's my working hypothesis. Let's say Queen Toadstool designs a Crown that functions like a sort of 'Practice Power Up.' Any time she experiments with new magic, she infuses it into the crown for a test drive. Want to test out new, explosive fire flowers? Use the crown to experiment with your magic. If it works, you develop a new Power Up based on that magic. If not, back to the drawing board. Dooplighosts were probably the inspiration for the powerups that involve transformation. Good catch, Goombario!"

At the sound of Goombella's supportive words, Goombario felt his stinging pride soothed slightly. (Though the spot where the ruler had landed was still smarting.)

Daisy scratched her head. "So, that's it? Bowser has the equivalent of a permanent Power Up stuck to his head? Well, that's not so bad. We use Power Ups all the time. They're useful, but not likely to blow up the Palace or anything!"

Luigi shook his head. "It's worse than that, Daisy. One Power Up by itself is a weapon, but who knows how this crown works? What if it stored all the magic the Queen of the Mushroom Kingdom ever tested on it? It'd be like having every Power Up you could ever need, all at once! …Uh, Daisy? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Luigi paused as he saw the inscrutable expression on Daisy's face. *"Oh no! Now she's mad at me for interrupting her! I'm such a jerk! She's probably going to put me in a headlock and give me noogies later!"* thought Luigi.

Daisy almost purred. *"Mmm! Luigi is so smart. I'm such a goof! I just want to put him in a headlock and give him noogies to show him how much I appreciate him! But I'll wait til later!"* thought Daisy.

Peach sighed. "I was worried about this. All this work and we still don't have much to go on… Thank you, Goombella, Kooper, Goombario. You've all done excellent work! I'll send for Professor Frankly and Professor Toad. I'm assigning each of you a Toad from my personal staff to act as your assistants. Anything you need, name it, and it's yours…Mizz. Litera Toad, may they have permission to access these materials as needed?"

Litera nodded, pleased that Peach was not overstepping her authority in the library. "These two are welcome anywhere, anytime!" she gestured to Goombella and Kooper in turn.

She aimed her ruler at Goombario, and checked her swing a few inches away from his nose (or rather, the spot where his nose would have been if Goombas had noses). "You, I'm not so sure about. But, as long as you're accompanied by an adult, I'll allow it."

Goombario gulped. "Yes ma'am!"

Satisfied, Litera Toad marched away, still keeping an ear open for overly loud comments in her library. Goombario fumed silently. *"This sucks! Goombella and Kooper aren't much older than I am! Why am I the only one singled out?"*

But before he could start sulking properly, Peach put a supportive hand on his hat. "Goombario, could you do me a favor? I'd like a copy of those ancient texts you were transcribing. The ones written in the mystery language?"

Goombario felt a mix of pride and confusion. “You want to be able to read these? Don’t get me wrong, they’re super cool, but this just looks like a mythic history of the Mushroom Kingdom.”

“The myths are what interest me the most. My father taught me that every legend contains a grain of truth.”

It occurred to Goombario that Peach might just be trying to make him feel better. “Don’t you want me to help Goombella on the crown stuff? That’s going to be way more important. Anyway, I can’t read this stuff!”

Goombella shook her head. “I can’t read that language either, Goombario, but Kooper and I can read Old Shroomish. It makes sense. We concentrate on translating the Old Shroomish texts quickly, while you take the first stab at decoding the mystery language. If anything, you’ve got the harder job.”

“Really? You think I can do it?”

Kooper clicked his tongue. “Goombario, you can do anything you set your mind to.”

“Right on!” said Daisy, giving Kooper a fist bump.

As Goombario felt the meaning of Kooper’s words sink in, he looked at Goombella, and suddenly saw her in a new light. He remembered the annoyance he felt when he realized Mario had replaced him with another Goomba. But now, she wasn’t just “Mario’s other goomba pal.” She wasn’t someone he had to outdo. She was a teammate. “Let’s-a go!” said Goombario.

Everyone put their hands in a circle, ready to cheer, “Let’s–”

With a furtive look at Litera Toad’s ruler, they all finished the chant in a whisper. “Let’s-a go!”

As the team finished their cheer, Peach insisted that everyone should get some rest after their long day. It was already past midnight. Without being asked, Mario escorted Peach safely to the hall that led to her bedchamber. It had been his silent custom since rescuing Princess Toadstool the very first time she was kidnapped by Bowser, before he and Peach were on a first-name basis.

Peach felt the palpable silence of the castle. For years, she’d allowed Mario to make this quiet, gallant gesture. She’d never felt before that she had to say anything. It was as if saying “Thank you,” would be too crude and clumsy as a recognition of his chivalry. But something about Bowser’s words was haunting her. What had Bowser called it? “The Friend-Zone?” Was Peach really taking advantage of Mario? How many times had he risked his life to help her, without expectation of a reward?

Peach felt hot anger at Bowser, but when Mario caught her eye, she felt she couldn't simply say goodnight, as was their custom. "Thank you, Mario, for everything you did today!"

Mario curled his lip. "Don't thank me, Princess! Feels like I spent most of my time standing around the library, hoping our friends could figure something out."

"No, you deserve a 'Thank you.' You deserve so much more than a simple 'Thank you.' I'm sorry I don't say it more often."

Mario removed his hat, and bowed his head. "When you look at me and smile, you show me more gratitude than the words 'Thank you,' could ever express. Good night, Princess."

As she saw him turn away, Peach couldn't help but call out. "I don't know why you help me, Mario. You're not a subject of the Mushroom Kingdom. Why do you do it?"

Mario froze, then turned back to look at her. "Because, it's the right thing to do."

Even as she heard Mario's words warm her heart, she also heard Bowser's taunt echoing in her ears. Mario's words were so good, so true, so beautiful, that she felt unworthy of them.

Peach felt like she had a peach pit in her stomach.

After sharing a long, longing glance, Peach and Mario finally turned and walked away from each other. Both muttered under their breath, "We have to get that crown away from Bowser."

Once the Bowser problem was taken care of, then they would finally have the time they needed to talk.

…

The moment that Mario and Peach mentioned Bowser's name, Bowser sneezed in his/her sleep and awoke, groggily. Oblivious to what was transpiring elsewhere in the castle, Bowser yawned and stretched, his/her massive breasts flopping free in the cool air.

"That was strange. I dreamt I was trapped in the middle of a bizarre fan-fiction written by an autistic woman with a thinly-veiled spanking fetish, only this one chapter kept going on and on with all this detailed lore about thrones and successions and junk…Ugh, so boring! Thank goodness it was just a dream. I can't wait to bust out of here and start kicking ass and taking names! It's gonna' be so cool!"

With that, Bowsette flopped back onto his/her pillow and fell soundly asleep.

[End of Chapter III]

Bowsette's Princes Lessons:
Chapter IV: A Trip Down Memory Lane
By Yu May

Peach felt a pang of remorse as she closed the door to her bed chamber. All she needed now was a good night's sleep, then she'd be able to tackle the Bowser dilemma in the morning. But to Peach's surprise, she found Princess Daisy on her 4-poster bed, lying on her stomach, kicking her feet behind her, and humming as she wrote in a journal. With a start, Daisy slapped the journal shut. "Peach? What are you doing here? I thought you and Mario would be…you know, taking one of your long, moonlit walks!"

Peach's mouth hung open. "Daisy? This is my bedroom! What are you doing here?"

Daisy hopped out of Peach's bed, and not-so-subtly clicked a small padlock that sealed her diary shut behind her back. "Don't you remember? We're having our slumber party tonight! To celebrate surviving our last adventure! Check it! Can you believe Luigi was going to throw this out? It's a perfectly good shirt!" Daisy held out her hands to present her sleep wear.

Peach furrowed her brow as she took in the sight of Daisy before her. In contrast to Peach, who always wore either a thin nightie or elegant woolen nightgown to bed, Daisy preferred to wear sweatpants and old t-shirts. Tonight, Daisy had yellow-orange yoga shorts with a white floral pattern, and a baggy forest-green t-shirt: which bore an emblem of Luigi on the front, and the words "Year of Luigi: 2013" on the back.

Looking misty-eyed, Daisy gave the shirt a sniff. "Mmm! It smells like Luigi! Salty, but refined!"

Peach snickered. "Of course, our sleepover! I remember now! With all the chaos today, it completely slipped my mind. Feels like we've been running non-stop for a week. But Daisy, aren't you too…tired?"

Peach paused as she noticed Daisy lowering her pajama bottoms and examining her bare behind in Peach's bedroom mirror. Daisy whistled as she looked over the marks left by the ruler. "Phew! I'd barely recovered from that caning Toadsworth gave us yesterday for going absent without leave, only to have that warrior librarian of yours take her ruler to me! How are your battle-scars looking, Peach? I have a feeling Toadsworth went way harder on you, which sucks because it's kinda my fault we ran away in the first place. Then again, my dad's totally going to tan my hide when I get home for causing so much trouble, so in the end it probably all balances out!"

Peach paled and covered her bottom. She'd forgotten all about the caning until Daisy had so helpfully reminded her. Beneath her pink gown, the mottled cane marks still twinged slightly whenever she bent over. "I think they've mostly healed by now."

Daisy glanced back at her own backside in the mirror. The tan-lines left by their time baking in the Dry Dry Desert sun were clearly visible. “Really? Wanna compare them to mine?”

Peach’s face went straight from pale-moon white to blood-moon red at the thought of baring her bottom for inspection. “No, thank you, Daisy! I’d rather get dressed…in private?”

Daisy pondered this strange request, then pulled up her shorts with a nod. “Gotcha! Hey, remember doing calisthenics at Princess Academy? You used to get *super* shy in the girls’ locker room! Well, don’t worry, I’ll make sure no one sneaks up on you! Nobody’s snapping your butt with a wet towel on my watch!”

Peach sighed. “...Thank you, Daisy.” She thought about asking Daisy to leave the room entirely, but decided it would be easier and less embarrassing to just get dressed quickly rather than try to spell everything out. At Princess Academy, the time-honored tradition of “encouraging” classmates with a towel snap to the heinie had been torture for Peach, whereas Daisy had been one of the most ferocious towel-snappers. When Peach had asked Daisy, politely, to stop towel-whipping her, Daisy had not only instantly agreed, she’d also made a solemn, sacred vow to watch Peach’s back in the locker room, for all time.

Peach quickly donned her nightie behind her decorative dressing screen, and couldn’t resist a quick peek at her peach-shaped posterior. Sure enough, the old cane marks from yesterday had faded to a mottled pink. Daisy whispered urgently from the other side of the screen. “Peach! Coast is clear! Your butt’s safe!”

Peach emerged to find Daisy scouring the room, darting from the stained-glass windows to the door in search of towel-wielding assassins. Peach couldn’t help but smile. “Daisy, I’m completely bushed! Why don’t we just turn in for the night?”

“Yeah, good idea! I have so much I want to talk about, but we really need to get to…bed?” As Daisy uttered the last word, she spotted her locked diary laying on the bed, and dove to scoop it up and “hide” it in the dressing table. “We’ll talk about girl stuff tomorrow night!”

Relieved, Peach yawned, dimmed the lights, and snuggled under the covers. “Thanks, Daisy! We’ll deal with the Bowser problem tomorrow morning when we’re refreshed.”

Just as she was about to lay down to rest, Daisy shot up from her pillow. “Oh? I know what to do about Bowser, that’s easy! I’ve been thinking about it all day.”

Peach snapped awake. “What? You know what to do with Bowser?”

Daisy rolled her eyes and chewed her bottom lip. “Dur-hur! Think about it! What happens to you and me when we do something bad?”

Peach was struggling to keep up, but Daisy didn't wait for an answer for her rhetorical question. "We get spanked, of course! And Bowser is a bad, bad girl, right? Or, rather, a bad, bad turtle man trapped in the body of a bad, bad girl!"

Peach was lost. "So…the plan is?"

Daisy grinned like an evil clown. "It's simple! We *spank* the bad man!"

"Daisy, Bowser is a megalomaniacal tyrant. I don't think you can fix something like that with a little spanking."

"Of course not! He needs lots and lots of spanking, to make up for lost time. But only when he deserves it! We don't want to be needlessly cruel!"

Peach groaned. "Daisy, that just won't work. People don't just magically change their nature because you start hitting them!"

Daisy threw off her covers and pantomimed the act of spanking herself. "But our dads never, *ever* hit us! They *spank* us! It's completely different! They only spank us because they love us! And why not? It works, doesn't it! Hasn't your dad taught you to be a better princess by spanking you?"

Peach felt her stomach clench. The truth was she had only been spanked a few times in her entire life. It was true that her father had spanked her himself a few times when she was very young, but as he started to get older, he had passed that duty on to Toadsworth, who had been responsible for Peach's education and discipline since she was old enough to enter Princess Academy. Generally, Peach liked to forget about her spankings as soon as they were over, but each one was painfully memorable. Daisy, in contrast, had been spanked rather frequently by both her parents. And ever since both princesses were punished together for running away, Daisy had been all too eager to discuss her spankings in detail.

As Peach considered her last painful experience with the cane, she had to admit it had taught her a lesson. "Well, I suppose it works for us, but that doesn't mean it will work on Bowser. He has to *want* to do better."

Daisy paused in the middle of delivering her pretend spanking, her hand held high. "...Oh, now that you mention it, that does throw a hitch into the plan. Come to think of it, Dad never spanks me without talking to me about what I did first. He always says a spanking won't do me any good if I'm not sorry and try to do better. Sorry, Peach, guess it was a dumb idea!"

Peach had a light bulb appear over her head, and pressed her index finger to her lips delicately. "No, Daisy…It's not a dumb idea at all! It just needs a little…refinement!"

…

Paralyzed, Bowser trembled furtively in his sleep. He was sitting in the divorce court, wearing his sharpest 3-piece suit. His twin brother, Morton C. Koopa, adjusted his glasses. Except for his blue hair and sea green shell, Morton was the spitting image of Bowser. “Don’t worry, Big B. Even if they rule against us, we’ll have grounds for an appeal.”

“Appeal? What’s that mean? There’s nothing appealing about this place!” Bowser glanced around the courtroom, his head throbbing. Then he spotted her. His ex-wife, Claudia Koopa, sobbing crocodile tears into a handkerchief, surrounded by a crack team of greasy, big-shot lawyers, paid for by King Wart, her new beau.

Between the two legal teams, Claudia and Bowser’s first and only egg sat in a specially prepared incubator, also dressed in a suit and a tie.

The legally-blind Judge Koopa missed his gavel a few times as he slammed down his hammer, his powdered white wig in danger of flopping off his bald head. “This court finds that all lands and properties of the Koopa Kingdom shall be evenly divided between the two parties…”

Bowser wiped the sweat from his brow. That was better than he was expecting.

“As for the matter of child custody, this court believes that mother and father should continue to share custody until such time as Koopa Child Protective Services can complete its investigation.”

Bowser knocked over his chair as he stood. “No! What is there to investigate? Haven’t you already seen more than enough evidence?”

As she pretended to weep, Claudia Koopa flashed Bowser a wicked smile, so that only he could see. “Justice is done!” she cooed.

“We’ll appeal immediately!” squeaked one of her lawyers, before she elbowed him in the ribs.

With a roar, Bowser slammed his fist into the wooden table, smashing it. “No! She can’t be trusted to care for that egg! She told me herself–she doesn’t even *want* the baby–that she’s only doing this to hurt me!”

Morton shook as his legal documents were sent flying. “Big B, please! You have to keep a cool head! It’s your only chance to win the court over!”

But before he could incinerate the courtroom, Bowser became aware of himself, outside of himself. He was weak, and small, and his hands were hideous and pale, with too many fingers. The old Bowser stood meekly in the courtroom, as his precious child was carted away from him.

“No,” squealed Bowser, but he could only hear a frail woman’s voice. “Don’t you know what’s going to happen next? Do something! Fight!”

Morton was weeping. “I’m sorry, Big B! I’m so, so sorry! It’s all my fault!”

Bowser turned on Morton, ready to heap abuse on him, but something was wrong. Morton was small now, wearing a bib. “It’s my fault, Big B! I b’woke it! He’s coming!”

Bowser looked around. It was his childhood nursery. “Who’s coming?”

Morton crawled under the crib, hiding in the shadows. “...The monster! The Great Demon King!”

A hideous roar shook the castle. A demonic voice bellowed, “Who did it? Where’s that little shit?”

Then Bowser remembered. This was the old nightmare. Always the same. He knew there was no escape from the Great Demon King. Rushing to lock the door, he spoke the same words he always did. “Stay under the crib, Morton!”

The monster slammed against the door. “Lemme’ in! Let me in, you little monster! I’m gonna’ roast you over a slow fire!”

Pointlessly, Bowser pressed his weight against the nursery door. But he was too small! He was too weak!

Then, something interrupted the flow of the old nightmare. A woman’s voice, low and far away. “...Poor, sweet baby. I had no idea. You’ve been fighting so hard, trying to be so strong, for oh, so long…”

Bowser felt the door splinter and shatter as the Great Demon King kicked it down, the way it always happened, but this time it was in slow motion. “Mommy? Is that you?”

The woman held out her arms, welcoming him to her bosom. “Come to me, baby. I’ll keep you safe forever!”

Bowser toddled to her, wanting to be lost in her embrace, wanting to disappear from the nursery. But something stopped him. In the midst of the dream, he became lucid. “Wait, this never happens in the dream! You’re not my mommy!”

The blond woman smiled wide, revealing her pointed teeth. “Please, let me help you! Let me take you away from this nightmare!”

But Bowser turned away from her to look for Morton, shivering under the crib. The Great Demon King was coming. “No! I’m the one who broke it! It was me!”

As the door smashed open, Bowser knew there was no escape. There could never be an escape.

It was his first, eternal memory: fear, followed by pain.

…

Bowser awoke with a gasp, still shivering in his cot. Over the years, he'd taught himself to awaken on command, when the old nightmare haunted him. Rubbing his head, he struggled to get his bearings. Strangely, he felt completely rested. In fact, that had been one of the best night's sleep he'd enjoyed in his entire life!

"Rise and grind!" roared Bowser as he hopped to his feet. Only when he caught sight of his bare, lily white boobs and mussy blond hair in the mirror did he recall his predicament. "Ooo boy! It's a wee bit *nipply* out here! I'd *breast* put a shirt on!

Picking up the black ballroom gown he wore yesterday, Bowser sniffed it, shrugged, and put it on again. Then he did a double-take and examined the mirror again. His hair was blood red, and his skin tanned to bronze. That was what they were supposed to be, right? Yeah! Just like he remembered from last night! "Wait! Got to keep a clear head! My brilliant surprise attack on Castle Toadstool failed, through no fault of my own. Then the Crown of Queen Toadstool turned me into a woman…and Peach put me in the friend-zone! And then…"

Bowser approached the broken mirror hesitantly, waiting for his reflection to do something crazy. "Hello? Spooky ghost babe? Queen Toadstool? …Uh, Bowsette? Yoo hoo!"

Bowser tapped the crown on his head, expecting it to work like a microphone. "Is this thing on?"

He shook his head. "Bah! That part was just a dream! I was overly distraught by Peachy's cold, heartless betrayal of my affections! How could she treat me that way? After all we've been through together!"

Bowser examined his cell, then drummed his fingers together. He was getting used to having more manual dexterity. "Then again, she's young and foolish. I'll just give her the cold shoulder. Sooner or later, she'll see how wrong she was and come crawling back to me on bended knee! It's not like she has any better options!"

Bowser flexed his biceps and kissed them, slightly disappointed to find them so diminished in his feminine form. "So, all I've got to do is keep a clear head and wait for my chance to–"

Outside his cell, the door to the former-dungeon/refurbished-guest-bedroom creaked open. Toadette appeared carrying a tray of steaming pancakes drizzled with honey syrup, a protein-rich Shroom Shake, and a kettle of Koopa Tea. "Breakfast is served, King Bowser!"

Bowser was salivating as he caught the aroma, floating on air towards the meal, before his face bonked into the iron bars. “Oh! Hand it over, now!”

Toadette started to obey, before she caught herself. “I’m sorry, your Majesty. Please sit on your cot while I pass the meal through the food port.”

Toadette gestured to a bell hanging behind a painted yellow line that indicated the safe zone. “When I ring the bell, you may collect your tray!”

Smoke billowed from Bowser’s nostrils. “And what if I refuse?”

Toadette pressed her feet together. “In that case, I can’t serve you your breakfast. I’m sorry, your Majesty, but those are my orders from Captain Toad.”

Bowser’s hunger won over his desire to get his way. “Fine! Be that way!”

After Toadette placed the tray in Bowser’s cell and rang the bell, Bowser sprang hungrily to snatch up his breakfast. But before he could chow down, he sensed the presence of another person in the room. “Who’s there? Come out, you sneak!”

A toad with red spots emerged from the shadows in the corner of the cell. He had an unremarkable face, like most toads, but his eyes were sharp and he wore a red scarf that bore a symbol of his rank. “Well done, Toadette. I knew I could count on you!”

Toadette failed to hide her look of awe, her twin toad-tails bouncing. “Captain Toad! You were watching me?”

“No. I was watching…*him!”* Captain Toad placed a teasing emphasis on the last word, before dismissing Toadette.

Bowser narrowed his eyes. “Do I know you from somewhere?”

Standing firmly on the yellow safety line, Captain Toad crossed his arms. “We’ve met before.”

Bowser grinned wickedly, then started stuffing his face, inhaling an entire pancake in one bite. “Gee, you must not have made much of an impression!”

Captain Toad refused to dignify Bowser’s teasing with a response.

After guzzling the Shroom Shake, Bowser remembered something. “Hang on! Aren’t you that schmuck who likes to moonlight as a treasure hunter?”

“Only when I’m not on duty.”

A few crumbs of pancake flew from Bowser's mouth as he guffawed. "Yeah! And you're the toad who helped Mario take out that chump King Wart!"

"You seem to know a lot about me. Guess I made an impression after all!"

"Oh, I always keep close tabs on my Peachy-Poo-Koo! You can't be too careful these days. My Lakitu and Shy Guy spies put you fungi to shame! It was hilarious watching you and that fat frog Wart going at each other. I didn't know who to root for!"

"Well, we got King Wart in the end. And now we got you!"

Bowser paused, half a pancake hanging from his mouth. "Mwahfff'dah?"

Realizing that talking with his mouth full was spoiling the effect, he threw back his head and downed the rest of the pancake in a single chomp. "What's that? I can't hear you so good! Step a little closer and say that again!"

Captain Toad shook his head. "Nice try! But rules are rules. We've got to set a good example for Toadette!"

Bowser took a delicate sip of tea. It was rich and well brewed. "Yes. How else are you supposed to reduce incompetence without *setting* an example of good leadership? Also, I never fail to *make* an example out of someone who displeases me!"

Captain Toad didn't reply. His toe crept over the safety line, but he didn't cross it. Satisfied, Bowser drank the rest of his tea in silence.

A soft voice at the back of his head whispered: "Mario, Luigi, and this guy. Got to keep both eyes open when they're around."

…

"Are you sure this is a good idea, Peach?" asked Luigi, holding a gloved hand against his lip. He had never forgotten the time Bowser had plucked out the hairs of his mustache, one at a time.

Before Peach could answer, Daisy pulled both Peach and Luigi into a half-hug, and whispered conspiratorially, "Of course she's sure this is a good idea. After all, I came up with it, and Peach *refined* it, so it's basically The Number One Good Idea…*Squared!*"

Luigi did some quick math in his head. "...But, Daisy, isn't the square of one still just…one?"

Daisy's mouth hung open. "Woah. That sounded pretty deep, Luigi."

Mario failed to hide his scoff behind his mustache.

Peach had a feeling she knew what was troubling him. “Mario, something is on your mind. What is it?”

Realizing he’d let Peach read him like an open book (again), Mario’s cheeks flushed as red as his hat. “You’re the princess, Princess! Bowser is your prisoner, so it’s your decision! I’m here to help, not argue.”

Peach nodded. “I appreciate your loyalty, Mario, but I also want to hear your counsel. What is that lovely phrase you mentioned, about the laws of your home country of Brooklyn?
Ah yes, you call it your ‘First Amendment Rights’?”

Mario snorted. “For the last time, Princess: Brooklyn is my neighborhood, New York is my city, and America is my country.”

“But I thought New York was a sovereign state, and America was a continent?”

Mario forgot to look serious and stoic. “It is…but…Mama mia! I meant to say ‘New York City.’ New York *City* is the city! *New York* is the state! And all fifty states together make the United States of America, and…” Mario paused his tirade as he noticed Peach’s subtle smile, “...and you didn’t forget any of that. You’re just teasing me!”

“Only a little, but I meant what I said about your ‘First Amendment.’ We may not have your Constitution or Bill of Rights in the Mushroom Kingdom, but we most certainly have Freedom of Speech. Please, speak your mind, Mario. If you think this is a bad idea, I won’t be offended.”

Mario sighed, but with more relief than exasperation. “Suit yourself! In that case, I think it’s a lousy idea! I don’t see what letting Bowser out of that cell is supposed to accomplish! He’s just going to use this as an opportunity to look for an escape. So I guess it’s up to me to watch him like a hawk. And when Bowser inevitably makes a break for it, you can count on me and Luigi to take him down, again, and haul him back to his cell, again!”

Peach nodded. “Yes, thank you, Mario. I have complete faith that you and Luigi can handle Bowser.”

Luigi’s chest swelled. “Yeah! You can count on the Mario Brothers to take on any job!”

Daisy basked in the radiant glow of Luigi’s glory. *“Wow! He’s such a go-getter!”* she thought.

Peach held her trembling hand firm as she opened the door that led to Bowser’s dungeon cell/guest bedroom.

The stone carving above the door read: “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.” Peach had hung a poster with the words “Live, Laugh, Love” in pink letters, with a little heart dotting the letter “i,” to cover up the words: “Abandon hope.”

…

Bowser’s head snapped up as the door to the dungeon creaked open, then cursed as he realized he’d forgotten the death-stare contest with Captain Toad.

Toadette bowed demurely. “Good morning, Princess!”

At the sight of Princess Peach, Bowser almost leapt to his feet to recite one of his 154 original love sonnets. But then he remembered that he was supposed to be giving Peach the cold shoulder, and growled. “What do you want?”

Peach’s voice cracked with fear, before she forced herself to sound casual. “Bowser! Ahem! I thought I’d invite you to join Princess Daisy and me for our morning jog!”

As Bowser looked over Peach, he noticed to his delight that she was wearing her cute, little tennis uniform! Bowser choked with excitement, before he forced himself to sound casual. “You’re inviting me on a stroll? Oh, Poochie! I knew you really…uh, were a *big nerd!* Jogging? C’mon! Anything that isn’t hardcore bodybuilding is a waste of my time!*”* Bowser tried to make his pecs jiggle, which always impressed the ladies, before remembering he had breasts now.

Mario felt his temper rise, but kept his peace. Of course Bowser wasn’t going to cooperate! Hopefully Peach would realize this was a waste of her time.

Then, to the complete shock of both Mario and Bowser, Peach shrugged and turned daintily towards the door. “Oh well, then I apologize for wasting your time!”

“Wait!” roared Bowser, sending the scraps of his breakfast flying as he nearly tripped over the food tray. Pressing his delicate, tan cheeks between the cold bars of his cell, Bowser’s voice became a pitched wail, “Don’t leave me!”

As Peach turned to look coyly over her shoulder, Mario finally understood her game. *“She’s got Bowser wrapped around her little finger!”* he thought.

Bowser fumed as he realized he’d lost his cool. “Humph! As if you weren’t just toying with me! You’ve got a sick sense of humor, Peach!”

“It wasn’t a joke, Bowser. It’s my tradition to invite all visiting princesses to join my morning Princess Academy exercises. You’re a royal guest, and given your…situation, I thought it was only fair to offer you the opportunity to join us…as a fellow princess!”

Bowser reeled his head back and roared. He wanted to aim a blast of his fiery dragon breath right at Peach's perfect peach-shaped posterior, but could only manage a small puff of smoke. "Bah! You *are* making fun of me! I'm *not* a princess! I'm a super-macho-manly-man turtle king!"

Peach cooed softly as she held a dainty finger to her luscious lips. "Ooh! Did I offend you? I'm so sorry! We respect that you are still Bowser, King of the Koopas…on the inside!"

It occurred to Mario that Peach was being entirely sincere, but there was *just* enough of a teasing hint to her voice to reel Bowser in.

"And don't you forget it! I'm dangerous! The second you let me out of this prison, I'm gonna–" Bowser choked as he tried to force himself to threaten Peach. He had planned to promise her a good spanking. (All women need a good spanking from time to time, after all!)

Then Bowser thought of all his favorite bullying comments he liked to use on his underlings, but he couldn't bring himself to utter them. Peach was too pure, too wonderful to threaten.

In Bowser's long career as a kidnapper, not once had he ever imagined himself doing Peach the slightest harm. Not until yesterday, at least: the moment she'd put him in the friend zone.

As Bowser felt both his love for Peach, and his new-found hatred for Peach, he willed himself to hold his tongue, then seated himself on the floor.

As the silence dragged on, Peach swallowed a lump in her throat. *"Oh no! I overplayed my hand!"* she fumed, wishing she could properly kick herself. Taking a deep breath, Peach turned back to face Bowser. "That room doesn't have to be a prison, Bowser. It was one, once, but I converted it into a guest bedroom."

Bowser forgot his resolve to keep silent. "Of course! And I'm not your prisoner! I'm your honored 'guest!' Spare me the niceties!"

Peach knelt to the dusty stone floor to speak with him at eye-level. "Haven't I been your 'guest' many times over the years?"

"That was different! I treated you like a princess!"

"And I want to return the favor. That's why I invited you to our Princess Academy exercises. Of course, you don't have to be a princess to join Daisy and me. Mario and Luigi are joining us this morning. Toadette? Captain Toad? You're both invited as well!"

Toadette gasped with excitement, before shuffling her feet. "Me? Participate in Princess Academy exercises? …But I'd just slow you down!"

Captain Toad shook his head. “Don’t sell yourself short, Toadette. I’ve seen your high scores on the obstacle course. You could give the royal toad guard a run for their money!”

Toadette blushed. “A girl has to watch her figure. Sure, I like to get a little exercise, but I’m no adventurer.”

Bowser pouted and stared at a crack on the ceiling. Peach sensed that she was losing his interest. “Won’t you join me, Toadette? I’d like to see if I can break Mario’s record!”

Bowser’s ear twitched. “You’ve got Mario playing these pretty, pretty princess games? Ha! That’s adorable!”

To Peach’s relief, Mario kept his cool, but she saw his eyes dart to meet hers, questioningly. She knew what he was thinking: *“Where are you going with this, Princess?”*

Peach tittered. “It’s actually a challenging obstacle course. Just because Daisy and I use it for our morning exercise routine from Princess Academy, that doesn’t mean it’s only for girls! In fact, I’ve dubbed it ‘The Mario Maker’ in honor of the Mushroom Kingdom’s strongest champions: the Mario Brothers!”

“Humph!” Bowser folded his arms. He was tempted to plead for a chance to compete, but a small, soft voice at the back of his mind urged him to be cautious. *“Be careful! Peach is up to something!”* whispered the voice.

Now that Bowser had decided to temporarily break off his engagement to Peach, he was starting to see her in a new light.

Since Peach was no longer his bride-to-be, it occurred to Bowser that behind the pretty face, Peach had a devious mind.

And now that Peach was his enemy, Bowser had the strange sense that Peach was…a real person.

Desperate to reel Bowser in, Peach took a gamble. Stepping past the yellow safety line, Peach approached the iron bars and held out her hand. Mario, Luigi, Princess Daisy, Captain Toad, and Toadette all stiffened as Peach inched closer, within Bowser’s reach. Mario would have leapt between her and the cell if Peach hadn’t shaken her head slightly as a signal to wait. “Won’t you join us, Bowser? I really do want to be friends!”

Bowser hid his laughter. How could he stay mad at Peach? She was so adorably stupid. Despite everything, she was *still* ready to trust him? Accepting her hand, Bowser gripped it firmly, relishing the moment of tension and Mario’s look of silent rage, before shaking Peach’s hand daintily. “Why not? I’ll show you how a real man handles an obstacle course!”

Peach nodded as she returned the hand shake. “But you’ll have to promise, on your word as…a man, that you won’t try to escape!”

Bowser sneered, then crossed his fingers behind his back. “You have my word as a man! I won’t try to escape!”

“After all,” whispered the small, soft voice at the back of his head, *“at the moment, you’re not a man!”*

[End of Chapter IV]

Bowsette's Princess Lessons:
Chapter V: The Super Mario Maker
By Yu May

Peach led the group up to the castle walkway that surrounded the central tower. A stained-glass image of Peach holding her hands in prayer decorated the doorway behind them. Before them sat a massive, yellow question mark block, with an engraved image impressed into the dot of the question mark. Peach beamed as she gestured to it. "This was designed by Professor E. Gadd. You have him to thank for designing the Poltergust 5000 that Luigi used to rescue you from King Boo!"

Bowser lifted an eyebrow as he strained his memory. To him, the image only looked like a big nerd in thick glasses. "Isn't he the same guy who built that super-soaker-thing Mario used to ruin my vacation at Delfino Island?"

Peach hoped she hadn't just put Professor E. Gadd onto Bowser's list of potential kidnapping victims. "Um…if you mean the F.L.U.D.D., then yes? E. Gadd designed that as well! But I programmed most of the levels for the Super Mario Maker myself…I had some free time the last time I was waiting for Mario to rescue me!"

Peach slapped the top of the question mark box, and it glowed with an inner-light. Then, the lid popped open and a torrent of bricks, blocks, pipes, and clouds exploded into the sky, rearranging themselves into an obstacle course high above the castle grounds below. The question mark on the front of the box spiraled, before shifting into a touch screen displaying the words "World 1-1."

Daisy huffed. "Ugh! Do we have to do this one again? I've done it a thousand times!"

Peach giggled. "Don't worry, Daisy! I have some special guests arriving soon! We're going to be adding a few twists to the old levels!"

There was an awkward silence, before Peach elbowed Daisy. "Daisy? It's your line!" Peach whispered.

Daisy started, then pulled out a set of index cards, and started reading her lines stiffly. "Oops! Uh…Ooooh, nooooo! We can't use the Mario Maker until everyone has signed the waiver! Bowser…if you want to…um…"

"Join us! If you want to join us!"

"Is that what it says? How am I supposed to read your curvy, squiggly letters? Oh! Uh… Bowser, If you want to join us, you will have to sign and date on the dotted line…right here?"

Mario wiped his brow to hide his nerves. He wasn't sure what Peach was up to, but it was obvious Peach was up to something. Thankfully, Bowser was too engrossed by the Mario Maker to notice. As he pressed the touch screen, the display changed to "World 1-2" and the obstacle course immediately began to rearrange itself. "Woah! This thing rules! …Hey! I recognize this castle design! This is one of mine!*"*

Bowser flashed Peach a devious smile. "Peach! You naughty little minx! You've been copying my castle designs…and this one's from *Super Koopa Cousins!* My kids play that game all the time!"

Peach bobbed her head nervously as she poked Daisy to offer Bowser the clipboard. Her original plan had been to distract Bowser by batting her eyelashes while Daisy would casually ask Bowser to sign the waiver. Late last night, it had seemed like a brilliant ruse in Peach's head. "That's right! I based my first few obstacle course designs off of old video game levels, but more recently I've been trying more creative, original concepts."

Daisy took a final, desperate glance at her cheat sheet before giving up and throwing it away. "Yup! The Mario Maker is pretty rad! I've been trying to break Mario's high score for weeks! So if you're ready to give it a shot, let's sign this waiver real quick and…"

Bowser finally tore his eyes off the incredible obstacle course as it rearranged itself into a new design, then snatched the clipboard and pen away from Daisy. "Ugh! Government paperwork! Can't a guy do anything without getting buried in red tape, then drowned in red ink? Let's just sign it and…"

Bowser narrowed his eyes, then pulled a pair of reading classes from his handy turtle shell compartment and examined the waiver form more closely. "Release of Liability…What's this one? Princess Academy Code of Conduct? What's that for?"

Peach quailed as Bowser stared her down. Thanks to his new, feminine form, Bowser's look gave him the air of being Peach's mother, and Peach felt like she had just been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. "That is…uh…"

Behind Bowser's back, Daisy was urgently mouthing the words, *"Lie to him!"* hoping Peach could read her lips.

Peach swallowed. "...To tell you the truth, Bowser, you don't need to sign that one to use the obstacle course."

"No! What are you doing?" mouthed Princess Daisy.

Bowser curled his lip. "Then why does it have a place for my signature?"

“Well, like it says, that form is the Code of Conduct for students of the Princess Academy. You’ll recall I invited you to join Daisy and me as a fellow princess? Of course, I understand that you’re a king, not a princess, so you don’t have to sign that one if you don’t want to.”

Bowser snorted. “Looks like a bunch of prissy rules about manners and politeness…Never raise your dress above the ankle? Never belch at the table? Sounds like a total drag!”

“Noooooo!” screamed Daisy, silently.

Peach nodded, as if she agreed fully with Bowser that the Princess Code of Conduct was totally lame. “It’s certainly difficult! I love being a princess, but not everyone has what it takes.”

“Bah! How hard can it be? Bake a few tea cakes, dance at a few balls, sit on a few parade floats!” Bowser imitated the stiff hand wave of a beauty queen. Behind him, Daisy pantomimed the act of strangling and curb stomping him.

Toadette lost her patience. “That’s not all being a princess is about! Being a princess means taking on responsibility! Princess Peach and Princess Daisy never stop working to help others! They have to embody poise, dignity, and grace at all times!”

“Yeah! And you have to be ready to fight for your people, even to lay down your life if necessary!” bellowed Princess Daisy. At the sound of this interruption, Bowser turned to look over his shoulder to catch sight of Daisy gnashing her teeth and cracking her knuckles behind his back.

Embarrassed, Daisy stood at attention, imitating Princess Peach’s demure posture. “Um, and that manners stuff is important, too!”

Peach snatched the clipboard from Bowser’s dainty fingers, surprising herself at how easy it was to pry it from his grip. “Yes! Daisy and I are actually taking a refresher course before this year’s Grand Mushroom Kingdom Ball. I wouldn’t bother with that one, Bowser. The Princess Academy regimen is infamous! Very few can make the cut!”

“Hey! I wasn’t finished with that!” whined Bowser, snatching it back. Then, a devious idea occurred to him. *“Of course, Peach wants to use these little princess lessons to try and persuade me to be ‘nice to people,’ and ‘renounce my bad guy ways!’ Ha! Oh, Peaches, you’re so adorably transparent! But I can use this to find an opportunity to escape, with Peach in tow!”*

Bowser grinned as he flipped through the pages of the Princess Academy Code of Conduct. “Manners, ethics, education, discipline…Bah, humbug! I think I can handle a few princess lessons. Where do I sign?” Bowser snatched the red pen from the clipboard and licked the end of it.

Peach put a hand on the clipboard before he could sign, a guilty look on her face. “Wait, Bowser! You really should read that before you sign it. The Princess Code of Conduct is a sacred oath. It’s not something to be entered into lightly.”

Daisy forgot to keep her poker face. *“C’mon, Peach! We’ve already got him, hook, line, and sinker!”* thought Daisy.

Bowser smirked, then signed his name on the dotted line with a flourish. “There! I’m signed up for your little Princess Academy lessons! I can’t wait for us to have some girl-to-girl bonding time, Peach-Hips!” Then Bowser planted a playful slap on Peach’s rump.

That was too much for Mario. Breaking his silent vigil, he marched to stand between Peach and Bowser. “Keep your hands to yourself, Koopa.”

“Yeah! Only *I* get to slap Peach’s ass, encouragingly!” fumed Daisy!

Bowser stared at his offending hand, as if it had slapped Peach’s backside of its own accord. *“That’s odd! I’d never have dared to try that before?”*

Peach felt equally incensed by the sneak-attack spank, and equally shocked that Bowser would actually lay a hand on her. Somehow, now that Bowser was a woman, he was much more of a male chauvinist than he’d ever been as a man! But Peach couldn’t risk having a brawl break out on the narrow castle tower walkway. With an effort, Peach ignored the affront to her dignity, and giggled sweetly, before patting Daisy playfully on the behind. “Oh, Daisy, Bowser’s one of us now! What’s a little love-tap between girl friends?”

Daisy hopped forward as she felt the playful swats. “Huh? Well, if you don’t mind, Peach, I guess I don’t mind! I just remembered you were always sensitive about your butt getting–”

“Why don’t we get started on our morning exercises!” Peach interrupted, before Daisy could describe her getting her bare ass slapped with a wet towel in the girls’ locker room in exhaustive detail in front of Mario.

Daisy nodded exuberantly. “Yeah! Let’s do it!”

Peach pulled a small lady’s watch from around her neck. “Then there’s only one more thing we need! Some friends to help us bring this obstacle course to life. They should be arriving any moment…now!”

As if on cue, the castle tower door opened, and most of Mario’s old adventuring party arrived. Bombette the Bob-omb, Parakarry the Parakoopa, Lady Bow the Boo, Watt the Sparkie, Mrs. Sushie the Cheep-Cheep, Lakilester “Spike” the Lakitu, Koops the Koopa, Madame Flurrie the Wind Spirit, Gonzalez Jr. the Yoshi kid, Vivian the Shadow Siren, Admiral Bobbery the Bob-omb, and Ms. Mowz the Squeek. Bringing up the rear was Koopie-Koo and Goombaria.

“Everyone present, and accounted for, your Highness!” huffed Admiral Bobbery, in his sharp, sailor’s accent.

Koops’ fiance, Koopie-Koo pressed her way through the throng to introduce herself to Princess Peach, before hugging her husband-to-be. “Thanks for inviting us, Princess Peach! This will be my first chance to show Mario what I can really do! I’m not quite as strong as my future hubby, but I’m still a trooper!”

Koops’ blushed furiously. “Now, Koopie-Koo, none of that false modesty. You know you’re downright tenacious when you make up your mind to do something!”

Koopie-Koo narrowed her eyes. “Oh? So you’re saying I’m stubborn?”

“...Um…uh…In a good way, Koopie-Koo?”

Koopie-Koo surprised Koops with a kiss. “Why, thank you, Boopie-Boo!”

Bowser faked retching at the sight of this public display of affection.

Then, to everyone’s surprise, Daisy slapped Bowser across his wide, curvy, bouncy, jiggly, bubble butt, hard enough to produce a thunderclap. “I can’t wait! Nothing like a little friendly competition between princesses, right *Princess* Bowser?”

Bowser winced, but with an effort, he swallowed his urge to scream. “Yeah, we’re all princesses now! Say, here’s an idea! How about a little wager, just between me and you, Daisy? In the spirit of *friendly* competition, after we finish this obstacle course, what say the winner gets to spank the loser?” Then Bowser landed a reverberating slap of his own across Daisy’s toned, muscular behind.

Daisy took a sharp breath, before flashing Bowser a menacing smile. “Bowser, that’s the smartest thing I’ve heard you say yet! You’re on!”

“Oh my God! What is going on?” thought Luigi.

“Ooh, la la! We haven’t even started, and I can already tell this is going to be fun!” cooed Ms. Mowz.

With that, Peach pressed a finger against the Mario Maker, and adjusted the setting back to World 1-1. With a whoosh, the obstacle course dissolved and rearranged itself in a spectacular flourish. Far below them stretched the palace grounds, then Toad Town, which extended to the star-shaped fortress walls that protected the Mushroom Kingdom. Towards the end of the obstacle course, they could make out the shape of a bulky castle floating on air, a star flag raising into the sky on a pole before it: the finish line.

Peach beamed with pride at the sight. “Then, let’s begin!”

[End of Chapter V]

Bowsette's Princess Lessons:
Chapter VI: Back to (The Old) School!
By Yu May

As Mario's friends took their places on the obstacle course, Bowser stretched his legs, oblivious to the fact that his new breasts and buttocks were both straining dangerously against the fabric of his black ball-room gown.

Peach whispered in Daisy's ear. "Do you think we should offer him one of our tennis outfits?"

Daisy stretched her shoulders as she considered the idea. "We've run this obstacle course in our ballroom gowns before! If he wants to borrow one of my outfits, let him ask politely…then I can say no!"

"Daisy, remember Princess Academy! Hospitality is a virtue!"

"Yes, and so is justice. I get we're trying to be nice to Bowser, but you don't have to baby him."

"C'mon! What's the hold up?" whined Bowser, as he did butt-kicks, his dress doing nothing to stop his melon-sized breasts from bouncing feely.

Luigi cleared his throat as he tried not to look at anything below Bowser's neckline. "Say, wasn't Bowser's hair blond last night? Why is he a ginger now?"

Toadette squeaked. "You're right, Luigi. I thought something was strange about Bowser this morning, but I couldn't put my finger on it! Sometimes he's blond, and sometimes he's a red-head!"

Daisy shrugged. "So what? Sometimes Peach is blond, and sometimes Peach is a red-head!"

Mario chuckled. "I remember that. The first time I met you, Peach, your hair was as red as my hat!"

Peach blushed at the memory. During her final year at Princess academy, she'd dyed her hair bright red on a dare (against her father's wishes) before Bowser had kidnapped her for the very first time. No sooner had Mario rescued Peach and returned her safely home, then King Toadstool noticed, and immediately fulfilled his promise to spank her. By the end of her ordeal, Peach's backside shone as red as her hair. Afterwards, she had rather wisely allowed her hair to return to its natural, peachy, strawberry-blond color.

"But, Daisy I *dyed* my hair. Bowser hasn't had a chance to do that?"

Daisy had a moment of dawning comprehension. "Oh! You guys are right! That is weird!"

Captain Toad hummed. “Come to think of it, I’m sure I saw Bowser’s hair change colors this morning, while I was watching her…erm, him!”

Toadette played with one of her ponytails. “Maybe it’s an effect of the crown? When he first showed up, he looked just like you, Princess Peach, but now he looks more like himself? Could its power be fading?”

Peach sighed. “I wish I knew! We just don’t know enough about how the crown works, so we can only guess. Hopefully the archaeology team can dig something–”

“Is this a workout session, or a lady’s gossip circle?” roared Bowser, as he jogged in place. With every kick of his shapely legs, Bowser provided a brief glimpse of his heart-covered men’s boxers.

Peach straightened up from the group-huddle to look Bowser in the eye. “We have to give Mario’s friends time to get in place, Bowser. Be patient!”

Bowser’s only answer was to harrumph, then start doing bicycle kicks, the skirt of his dress no longer doing anything to hide his supple thighs.

Peach felt something nudge her, and looked down to find little Goombaria, pouting. “Princess Peach! Won’t you please let me play with you guys? Pretty please!”

“I’m sorry Goombaria, but this is a pretty rough-and-tumble game. It’s easy to get hurt.”

“But you’re letting Watt play, and she’s younger than me!” whined Goombaria.

Mario shook his head. “Watt’s a Sparkie, Goombaria. She’s completely invincible, but you’re not. Your parents would never forgive me if I let any harm come to you!”

Goombaria sighed. Her orange hair bow seemed to be wilting. “I understand, Mr. Mario. I’m disappointed, but I’ll obey…”

Peach patted Goombaria on the head. “Thank you, Goombaria. I promise to run the obstacle course with you later to make up for it. You don’t need a babysitter, but *someone else* does!”

Peach nodded her head towards Bowser, hoping Goombaria would catch the hint.

Noticing Peach’s gesture, Goombaria nodded obediently. Then she winked slyly. “Which reminds me! Goombario is sleeping in, along with Goombella and Kooper. But Goombario told me he wants to tell you about his history project as soon as possible!”

Peach beamed. “Thank you, Goombaria!”

Bowser rolled his eyes. *“History? What a bunch of nerds!”*

Peach glanced at the control panel for the Mario Maker, and a lightbulb appeared over her head. “Say, Goombaria! I need someone I can trust for an important mission. Who would you recommend?”

Goombaria hopped in place, raising one of her invisible hands. “Me! I can do it! What’s my job?”

Peach gestured to the Mario Maker. “I need someone to man the emergency failsafe on the Mario Maker. If you press the big red button, the obstacle course will pause and return us all back to the castle safely.”

Goombaria’s eyes went wide. “But how will I know if I’m supposed to press the button?”

Tickled pink, Peach pressed her fist against her chin dramatically, as if she was stumped by this troubling conundrum. “Hmm! I suppose I could finger whistle! If you watch us on the screen, you’ll be able to see and hear everything. If you hear this…”

Peach put her thumb and finger in her mouth and blew a piercing whistle, “...that’s your signal to shut down the Mario Maker!”

Stars shone in Goombaria’s eyes. “Woah! I didn’t know you could do that! So, it’s like a secret code?”

Peach nodded, then kneeled down to whisper in Goombaria’s ear. “Exactly! Don’t press the button unless you hear our secret code!”

Goombaria glanced nervously over the edge of the castle tower battlement. They were well over 1,000 feet above the ground. “But what if one of you falls off?”

Toadette gestured to the Mario Maker’s control board. “Not to worry! The Mario Maker has an automatic safety feature that will catch us if we fall. You end up floating in a giant bubble…but someone else has to pop it!”

Toadette blushed as she remembered the time she’d had to wait for over an hour trapped in a bubble before Captain Toad had discovered her practicing on the obstacle course alone. Toadette had half-worried that Captain Toad might spank her for messing with the obstacle course without permission, and half-hoped he *would* spank her. Instead, Captain Toad had praised her initiative, then made her promise to ask him first next time.

Peach finalized the settings on the Mario Maker, then pointed Goombaria’s attention to the screen and the emergency button. “That’s right! As long as the emergency system is in place, it’s no problem if someone falls off the obstacle course!”

Goombaria considered this. “Oh, so that’s why I shouldn’t be too quick to press the button. Okay! Only if you give me the signal!”

Peach nodded, before she noticed Bowser shadow boxing. He was slamming his fists directly into the stone walls of the castle, without batting an eye. He wasn’t able to smash right through them like he could in his original form…but his fists seemed to be holding up just fine. “I trust your judgment, Goombaria. If you think it looks like anyone is in danger, or if…*someone* is getting too rough, don’t hesitate to press the button. You have my permission!”

Goombella grinned knowingly, then manned her station at the Mario Maker. “Right! If *someone* gets too rough!”

The Mario Maker rang with a musical signal: the first map obstacle course had finished loading! Everyone was in place!

“Yes! Finally!” bellowed Bowser and Princess Daisy, at the exact same time.

“...Ugh! That brat needs a spanking!” thought both Bowser and Daisy, as they stared each other down.

The Mario Maker rumbled, and a second musical jingle alerted the racers to line up at their marks. Bowser shoved Daisy out of his path to reach his preferred spot in the center. He leered at Daisy behind him, then turned to spot Mario had appeared in his blind spot on the right. “I’m going to enjoy crushing you in front of Peach, bilge-brains!”

Mario did not reply. He didn’t even look at Bowser.

Daisy appeared at Bowser’s left side, followed by Peach. Bowser wanted to cry out a romantic declaration of his intent to win this race in her honor, but with a scowl, he remembered the friend-zoning incident. *“Your loss, Princess Toadstool. We’re officially on a break!”* fumed Bowser.

Then he saw Peach waving cutely in his direction. Touched, Bowser lifted a hand to wave back. Of course! She missed him! This was a subtle signal of her girlish affections!

“Good luck, Mario! Good luck, Captain Toad!” cheered Peach.

Bowser turned back to find Captain Toad had joined Mario on the far right side of the starting line. “This will be fun. Reminds me of the time we took down King Wart together!”

Mario nodded curtly, but didn’t take his eyes off the flag in the distance.

Peach turned over her shoulder, and called to Luigi, who was shuffling his feet. “Quickly, Luigi! The countdown is about to start! Please join us!”

Luigi leaned against the castle wall, trying to look casual. “Oh? Isn’t the obstacle course getting a bit crowded? Maybe I’ll just wait until–”

Daisy roared so loudly, Bowser thought a foghorn was rammed through his ear. “Luigi! Get’cher butt in here!” Remembering her lessons on politeness from Princess Academy, Daisy added, “…Pretty please?”

Luigi scrambled to the starting line, taking the last open spot on the far left of the track. “Okey dokey!”

Noticing Captain Toad glance at her, Toadette shook her head. She wasn’t quite confident enough to join the race yet. Captain Toad nodded, encouragingly. *“Next time!*” he seemed to be telling her, without words.

Instead, Toadette pulled out a checkered flag, and stood on top of the Mario Maker to announce the count down. “On your marks….get set…go!”

Not bothering to pace themselves, Daisy, Bowser, Mario, and Captain Toad burst off the finish line to compete for the early lead, with Peach and Luigi bringing up the rear at a steadier pace. Bowser thrilled at how light his legs felt as he sprinted, before stumbling over the hem of his black ball gown. “Argh! Stupid, stupid dress!” Bowser wondered just how silly girls had to be to wear such impractical clothing, before he saw Mario and Captain Toad taking the lead, running neck and neck. As Bowser saw Princess Daisy pass him on the left, smoke billowed out of Bowser’s nostrils.

“No you don’t!” growled Bowser and with a roar, he tried to aim a blast of fiery breath at Daisy’s back. But instead of the usual explosion of red flames he expected, a small puff of pink fire, no bigger than a candle flame, flickered to life. Subconsciously, Bowser sensed something was wrong. “Huh?” As Bowser grunted in confusion, the pink flame shot out like a thin bullet.

Alerted by the sound of Bowser’s roar behind her, Daisy turned just in time to catch sight of the strange blast. “Woah!”

As Daisy jumped and arched her back to twist out of the path of the missile, it grazed against the fabric of her gym shorts. But, strangely, that was enough for the entire seat of her pants to catch fire! “Yeow!”

Thinking fast, Daisy stopped, dropped, and rolled to smother the pink flames. Only caring about the race, Bowser ignored Daisy, hiked up his dress with both hands, and charged past her to catch up with Captain Toad and Mario.

Seeing Daisy’s plight, Peach cried in distress. “Luigi! Help Daisy put out the flames!”

Desperate, Luigi ripped off his hat and slapped it sharply across the smoldering fabric of Daisy's shorts, until the last of the flames died out.

"Daisy? Are you hurt?" cooed Princess Peach as she caught up.

Then as Luigi examined his target, pleased to see that the flames had only left the seat of Daisy's pants charred and singed, it suddenly occurred to Luigi precisely what he was slapping.

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no, you klutz!" howled Princess Daisy, cursing herself.

Thinking she was referring to him, Luigi's hands flew away from Daisy's backside in a gesture of surrender. "Oh no! Daisy? I didn't mean to–"

Still thinking only of the race, Daisy slapped her face, then took a deep breath to calm herself. "Get it together, girl!" Then she glanced down to see the damage done by the flames to her gym shorts. "Huh? Oh! Great job, Luigi! Now, get back in the race!"

Realizing her shorts were in tatters, Daisy ripped them off with one clean tug, revealing a muscular tuchas clad only in yellow-orange panties decorated with the slogan, "Hi! I'm Daisy!" in white block letters. Luigi could make out every letter and stitch in the fabric, and even caught a peek of the tan line under Daisy's butt cheeks.

Oblivious, Daisy sprinted to catch up with her attacker, now wearing nothing but her sleeveless shirt and underpants. "Bowser! I'm gonna' *dust your britches* for that!"

As they were left behind, Luigi and Peach considered what they had just witnessed.

"Princess Peach? Do you think we have a chance?"

Peach smiled cutely. "Only if you don't quit, Luigi!"

Then Peach jogged at a brisk pace after Daisy.

Not sure if Peach had understood what he meant, Luigi stumbled to his feet to get back into the race.

…

Captain Toad wasn't as good a jumper as either of the Mario Brothers, but he made up for that with speed and stamina. Pulling ahead of Mario, Captain Toad slammed his fist into the first item block, hoping to get a super mushroom and power up. But Mario leapt up on top of the block to snatch the item first. Captain Toad had no time to complain as he spotted an enemy before him and leapt up and over it. Bowser sneered. "These pansies always hop around like rabbits. But I can barrel through anything!"

Bowser grinned with delight as he stopped his foot down on the enemy Captain Toad had avoided…but it wasn't a Goomba. It was a red Spiny. And Bowser was barefoot.

Bowser howled, hopping in place as he cradled his adorable, injured footsie. "Yeeooww! What's a Spiny doing here? Everyone knows you put your Goombas out first on the front line!"

"You're welcome, dude!" called Spike the Lakitu from above, waving to Bowser as he held a camera in front of him.

…

Goombaria sighed as she watched the race unfold on the Mario Maker's touch screen. "Well, there *could* have been a goomba, but apparently I'm not old enough to fight Bowser yet!" she grumbled, before shaking her head. "No whining! Got to concentrate! Peach is counting on me."

She saw Spike the Lakitu, who was acting as the camera man, wave to Bowser.

Goombaria focused on the screen, wondering if Bowser's foot injury counted as an emergency. She heard Spike call out from behind the camera as he filmed the race. "I'm Spike! Spike the Lakitu! And thanks to yours truly, red Spinies will be taking the place of Goombas on the obstacle– "

"Spike…the Lakitu? What, is 'the' your middle name? That is the goofiest, fakest, Sonic-the-Hedgehog-level-corny name I've ever heard! C'mon! What's your real name?"

Spike almost dropped his camera in his fury. The name on Spike's birth certificate was actually "Lakilester," but he never admitted that willingly. Spike sputtered, "Hey! That's none of your…I mean, my nickname is cool!"

"Ha! So it *is* fake! You gave yourself a nickname!" Bowser threw his head back and laughed.

But before Bowser could emotionally bully Spike some more, Princess Daisy clotheslined him from behind. "That's for the cheap shot!" cried Daisy over her shoulder as she raced ahead.

As she watched all this unfold on the screen, Goombaria hummed, trying to decide if what Daisy did counted as playing too rough with Bowser. "Hmm…I'll allow it!"

…

His skull splitting, Bowser stabbed his fingernails into the brick floor with such force, they left behind ten small holes, and launched himself up and after Daisy. "You think you're gonna win, Daisy? I'd take that kind of attitude from Princess Peach, but not from you!"

Daisy barked over her shoulder. "Try all you want, but I'm still gonna' win! Princess Daisy *always* comes out on top!"

Not bothering to slow down, Bowser tore at the skirt of the frilly black ball gown, and with a rip, the bottom half of the skirt tore away, leaving him wearing what looked like a ragged black mini skirt. As Bowser charged after Daisy, chugging and hooting like a runaway train, the smoke billowing from his throat perfected the illusion that Bowser was in fact a locomotive. “Brawhooo!”

Spike (A.K.A. Lakilester) the Lakitu’s sunglasses drooped down his nose in his shock as Bowser charged away. A few moments later, Spike saw Luigi and Princess Peach, trailing in last place. Luigi flailed his arms as he tried to sprint forward, before clutching his knees and gasping for air. Peach whistled a jaunty tune as she power walked, with a spring in her step. “Pace yourself, Luigi! Remember, it’s a marathon, not a sprint!”

Luigi wheezed. “Huh? H-how many courses do we have to run?”

Peach beamed as she passed Luigi at her slow but steady pace, almost skipping. “There are 8 worlds total and 4 stages per world, so that comes to a total of 32!”

As he sucked down air, Luigi felt a stitch in his side, sharp as a knife. There was no way! He was at his limit. His eyes watering, Luigi looked ahead and saw Bowser charging in hot pursuit of Daisy. She was in trouble! “Never…give…up!” rasped Luigi, as he fought through the pain.

“That’s the spirit, Luigi!” cheered Peach.

…

Mario and Captain Toad glanced behind them, and saw they had far outpaced the others. As champions of the Mushroom Kingdom, both Mario and Captain Toad had run this obstacle course thousands of times, to the point it became an act of muscle memory, but because the Goombas had been replaced by Spinies, both were being cautious.

Nevertheless, since Mario still had the power of the red mushroom, he risked taking a leap over two enemies in a single long jump, landing on a green pipe on the other side of the gap, while Captain Toad chose to dart around the enemies and gauge his jump more carefully, losing momentum.

Mario heard a sound like rushing wind, and dodged just in time before a green bolt went flying past him, grazing his mustache. The green missile turned out to be Mario’s old friend, Koops the Koopa, who slowed to a halt as he landed, and popped out of his shell, looking sheepish. “Sup, Mario? Um, hope you don’t mind that I’m not holding back. I’m, erm, really looking forward to fighting–”

Captain Toad interrupted Koops by landing on top of him. As the unassuming turtle reflexively hid in his shell, Captain Toad landed lightly behind him and kicked Koops directly towards Mario. Mario barely escaped a direct hit by leaping up and over Koops. “Hey!” growled Mario.

Captain Toad flashed a dazzling smile, the kind that made all the Toad girls swoon. “You heard him, Mario! I don’t want to hold back either!”

Mario heard a bump, and up ahead, saw that Koops had bounced against a brick wall, and was rocketing back towards him!

Koopa shells are both strong and smooth, nearly frictionless, which meant Koops could attack enemies by dive-bombing forward, and gliding on his smooth shell. But the blocks and bricks of the Mushroom Kingdom also held a magic that made them act like rubber when struck. In short, the cartoon physics of the Mushroom Kingdom, combined with Sir Isaac Newton’s good, old-fashioned laws of motion, meant that Koops was now a spinning wheel of pure, deadly, turtle power. Mario tried to leap out of the way of Koops for the third time, but something held him down. Captain Toad had leapt up onto Mario’s shoulder at the worst possible moment, before using Mario as a human launch pad.

Still hidden in his shell, Koops accidentally knocked Mario’s legs out from under him. The plucky plumber face planted, and shrunk to his original, diminutive height as the power of the red mushroom was knocked out of him. Furious at his mistake, Mario forgot everything else and rushed to catch up with Captain Toad.

Koops came spiraling to a halt. Thanks to their unique abilities, most Koopas could easily lose control if they were kicked and sent flying, but Koops had mastered the art of catching himself and leaping up off the ground to slow his momentum. Stumbling back to his feet, Koops tried to shake off his dizziness. “Woah! Um, don’t worry! I’m okay! We Koopas can take a lot of punishment, and still get back on–”

Princess Daisy tripped over Koops, sending him spinning on his back. Remembering her Princess manners, Princess Daisy cupped her hands to her mouth to cry out her apology as she sprinted toward the finish line undeterred. “Sorry! Please excuse my haste!”

Koops waved his arms, both as a polite goodbye to Daisy and as part of a futile struggle to get back on his feet, but his round shell prevented him from standing up easily. “Uh, no problem, Princess Daisy! See, I’ll just…Oh…Well, I’m sure someone will come along sooner or later and help–”

“You, Koopa Troopa! Quit lollygagging!” barked Bowser as he spotted Koops laying on his back.

“Er, respectfully, Bowser sir…uh…ma’am? Sorry, I don’t know what you prefer. But ya’ see, I’m a free Koopa, so technically, I don’t work for–”

Bowser kicked Koops and sent him flying after Daisy. If Koops was on his stomach, he could easily have stopped himself, but the combination of lying flat on his back, while also accelerating like a rocket, was a bit too much for him to handle. Unable to stop, Koops smacked

directly against Daisy's buttocks. The Princess of Sarasaland's toned gluteus maximus was as sturdy and bouncy as any Mushroom Kingdom brick, and so, Koops was again sent rocketing in the opposite direction. "Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!!!" hissed Daisy as she hopped in place and rubbed the injured area.

Bowser guffawed at the sight, and flashed two finger guns at Daisy as he passed her. "Ha, ha! That's called narrative foreshadowing, Daisy!"

Daisy resumed sprinting, still rubbing her sore behind with one hand. "Nuh, uh! It's called comic mischief, you dork!"

…

Leaping high over his enemies to reach higher ground, Luigi caught sight of Bowser launching a strange, green missile at Daisy from behind. "No! Don't you dare hurt my–"

After bouncing off of Daisy's buttocks, Koops flew through the air like a bullet, striking Luigi across the face. Luigi spun in place and collapsed.

Peach was humming a tune as she spotted Koops flying toward her. She caught Koops lightly up onto the palm of her hand, as though she was a waitress and Koops was a serving tray, then spun on her heels to halt his acceleration and help him land on his feet. "Sir Koops! Are you injured?"

His eyes spiraling, Koops saluted. "No, your, h-highness! Urp! All in the line of duty!"

Peach pulled a water bottle from her fanny pack and offered it to him. "Good work, trooper! Make sure you stay hydrated, and get plenty of electrolytes!"

Koops accepted the water gratefully before seating himself, mopping the sweat from his brow with his sky blue hoodie. Peach went skipping towards the finish line, before pausing again to tend to an injured Luigi. "Oh dear, I do hope everyone is remembering to pace themselves!"

…

Leaping up the stone stairs four steps at a time, Mario passed Captain Toad and dove towards the flag that represented the first finish line. Stylishly, he caught the flag in one hand, and glided down the flagpole with his free hand. The Mario Maker's soft, robotic voice announced, "World 1-1 Complete! Winner: Mario!"

But below him, Mario saw Captain Toad drop like a stone towards the base of the flagpole, spinning around it and kicking off to get a jump start on the second course. As Toad rushed through the front entrance of the castle and up onto the green warp pipe that led to the second

course, Mario heard the electronic voice announce: “World 1-2 Loading. Loaded! On your marks…get set…go!”

“Hey! Toad! Whatsa’ matta’ with you?” snarled Mario, slipping into his Italian-American dialect.

Captain Toad winked, as he sank into the warp pipe. “Nice win, Mario! But remember, it’s not a sprint! It’s a marathon!”

…

As she reached the top of the stone steps, Daisy spotted Mario hopping off the flagpole below her. Knowing that Mario had already scored the bonus points for capturing the flag, Daisy ignored the flag and dove low towards the middle of the flagpole, hoping to pull off a similar trick maneuver as Captain Toad. But Bowser had the exact same idea. The tan, muscular tomboy and the tan, muscular turtle-man-trapped-in-the-body-of-a-woman collided in midair, their faces smacking against each other cheek-to-cheek. But they managed to catch hold of the flagpole and pulled away from one another as they stuck their landing. The flag pole bent sharply under their combined weight.

Still chewing the green 1-Up Mushroom Peach had given him to help him recover from his traumatic brain injury, Luigi used his long legs to leap up the stone steps, not four at a time, but six at a time. But since there were only eight steps anyway, that just meant he took his final leap to the finish line blind. “Must! Save! Daisy!”

As Luigi cleared the stone steps, he saw only empty sky where the finish flag should have been. Looking down, he noticed Daisy and Bowser landing on the ground, pulling the flagpole down with them with their combined weight. And as they released their hold and rushed toward the castle–

“BWOING!”

“KA-THWACK!”

The flagpole sprung back into place, the iron ball striking Luigi squarely on the nose.

Reflexively grabbing onto the flagpole for dear life, Luigi slowly sank to the bottom, the metal squeaking softly against the soft fabric of his overalls. “...Ow.”

Luigi felt the squashed pancake that was once his magnificent nose, and popped it back into place. Above him, Princess Peach seemed to glide toward the flagpole, caught it, spun around it, and landed lightly on her tiptoe for a perfect 10-point finish. “Good job, Luigi! You beat me!”

…

The green warp pipe deposited Mario in the dark, dank catacombs of the castle: World 1-2. He caught a glimpse of Captain Toad snatching up a red mushroom, before dodging a group of Spinies.

As always, when Mario was focused on the thrill of the chase, he kept a stony silence. Mario hopped lightly across a series of brick pillars, which Captain Toad cleared easily, the power of the mushroom giving the tuban-topped Toad the ability to jump like…well, a regular toad.

As they landed on the stone floor opposite the pillars, Mario heard the familiar rush of wind that warned him of an incoming Koopa! Mario leapt to the side, while Captain Toad leapt up onto a higher platform of bricks, and out of sight. The attacking Koopa bounced off the wall behind Mario and ricocheted. Mario struggled to outrun his attacker, but he knew it was no use, and without a red mushroom, a single hit would knock him out of the game. The instant before the Koopa could strike him, Mario leapt up and landed on its back.

With a girlish shriek of surprise, the Koopa spun to a halt, and popped out of her shell, waving her blond pony-tail teasingly. “Hello, Mario. How did my Koops do? He’d better not have been spacing off!”

“Koops fought bravely!” called Captain Toad from above. Mario and Koopie Koo glanced up to find Captain Toad slamming his fist into a brick, and pulling a Super Star from the rubble.

Just as Captain Toad held the power up aloft, another Koopa, this one with wings, launched a surprise attack, swooping down from the high, vaulted ceiling. “Banzai!” roared Parakarry. As a part-time adventurer, and full time mail-carrier, Parakarry was used to taking swift and decisive action, but alas, this time he was too late!

Captain Toad’s body shone with an inner light as the Power Star activated, and the moment Parakarry struck his target, he was knocked back senseless, his eyes rolling and his aviator cap askew!

Captain Toad shrugged. “But it never hurts to admit when you’re beat!”

Mario and Koopie Koo shared a furtive glance, before running for their lives down the nearest corridor. Of course, getting stomped on wouldn’t kill them, but nobody wants a Game Over!

Parakarry shook his head, rattling it like a cowbell, and saw Princess Daisy and Bowser diving down into the underground world from above. Taking a deep breath, Parakarry recited the sacred oath of all mail carriers: “Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night…” Rolling back, Parakarry pressed his hands against the stone cold floor and performed a kick-up: an old martial arts trick Kooper had taught him to get back on his feet in the middle of a fight.

What greeted him was the sight of Princess Daisy and Bowser roaring defiance at each other as they barrelled straight towards him. Parrakarry blushed at the sight of Daisy wearing only yellow

underpants, and Bowser had hiked up the torn remains of his black dress up to reveal his men's boxers. "Crud!" squeaked Parrakarry. He wasn't afraid of snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night, but the sacred oath of the mail carrier said nothing about having to fight women in their underwear! Parakarry ducked out of sight just in time. The two furious rivals raced past the postal-working Parakoopa, oblivious of his presence as they continued their shouting match.

…

"So, Luigi, do you have anything this fun in Brooklyn, New York?" asked Princess Peach, as she and Luigi strolled past the destruction left behind by Daisy and Bowser's charge.

Still fighting for air, Luigi struggled to make conversation. "Um, nothing like the Mario Maker. I guess there was that one time the giant gorilla broke out of the zoo and carried off Mario's girlfriend! That was pretty wild!"

Peach stiffened. "Oh, you mean Pauline?"

Of course, Peach knew that Mario had an old girlfriend from New York. But ever since she'd heard Mario had invited Pauline to be the guest of honor for the grand opening of his toy company's new theme park in Mario Land, Peach had felt an inexplicable desire to kick Pauline's butt. This was still true, even after Pauline was elected mayor of New Donk City and started making more frequent visits to the Mushroom Kingdom. As a princess, Peach refused to allow her feelings to cloud her judgment. But there was no Princess Rule that said Peach had to hold back against Pauline on the tennis court!

Oblivious, Luigi nodded. "Yeah! I still can't believe those two broke up! I thought they were so cute together, don't you–"

"Well-anyway-that-was-a-long-time-ago-no-sense-bringing-up-old-drama!"

Still oblivious, Luigi nodded still more furiously. "Good idea! Best not to mention it around, Mario. Though I think he bounced back from it really well. And you know, Mario and Pauline are good friends now!"

As Peach's head swiveled to face Luigi, her neck seemed to creak like a rusty door. "You don't say?"

Swelling his chest, Luigi seemed to find his second wind. "Yeah! You know, Mama always said you should treat a girl right, so that she has nothing bad to say about you later…or she will! When I was a kid, I used to think that was just Mama being Mama, but it's so true when it comes to Mario! Even his *ex-girlfriend* thinks the world of him! Who can say that?"

"...You seem rather *observant* when it comes to your brother's romantic history."

“Well, to be honest, I never had a real girlfriend…except for that one girl from French class, but that really shouldn’t count. (Long story!) Anyway, I’ve been thinking recently about self-improvement, and looking for examples of guys who are good at talking to girls, and Mario’s sort of…right there, ya’ know? Except he doesn’t even talk to them that much! They all just seem to fall in love with him at first sight. Why do you think that is?”

Peach stalled for time by skipping neatly across a few brick pillars. “Well, I suppose Mario has a certain…presence.”

Luigi whipped out a notebook and scribbled furiously, before losing his footing on the last pillar and tumbling into Peach’s arms. “Oof! Okay, presence! Got it! And what do you suppose I could try doing if I wanted to have more of this…presence?”

Peach considered the question as she leapt over some remaining spinies, still carrying Luigi in her arms. “Well, Mario’s never afraid to fight for his friends, even against an enemy much bigger and stronger than he is. That’s pretty admirable. You can tell he’s always ready for a fight, just by the way he carries himself. That’s why I…I mean, I suppose that’s why all those girls pay so much attention to him. He seems like the toughest guy in any room.”

Luigi scratched his head as he flipped through older pages of his notes. “But Bowser’s always ready for a fight, and he’s usually the toughest guy in any room. Doesn’t he have a forceful presence, too?”

Genuinely puzzled, Peach set down Luigi and pressed her fist against her chin pensively. “It’s not the same, Luigi. Bowser’s a big bully…You know, it’s strange, I have always felt a bit sorry for Bowser, but now that Bowser has been magically transformed into a woman, it’s as though I’m seeing him for the first time. He’s so *awful* to people, but now that he’s lost his strength, it’s as though awfulness is all he has left.”

Luigi put away his notebook. “Assuming his strength really is gone, of course. If only there was a way to–” Luigi did a double-take as he examined their surroundings, then slapped his forehead. “Of course! That’s why you invited Bowser to run this obstacle course! You want to trick him into showing you more of the crown’s–”

Peach pressed a finger to Luigi’s lips to shush him. “An excellent deduction, Luigi! But for the plan to work…”

She pinched the brim of Luigi’s hat for emphasis. “...we’ll have to keep it under our hats!”

Luigi saluted. “Aye aye, Princess!”

“Thank you, Luigi! …And don’t fuss too much about what girls think of you. I think you’re quite a catch already!”

“Definitely!” squeaked a strange voice hidden above their heads. Luigi leapt into Peach’s arms with a squeal of terror.

Parrakarry appeared above them. “Oops, sorry! Should have announced myself!”

Peach raised an eyebrow. “Parakarry? I hope you can be discreet.”

Parakarry pretended to zip his lips and held his right hand across his heart. “I will treat your words with the same respect as the mail! Secrecy is sacrosanct! Especially when you’re dealing with Bowser!”

…

Bowser sneezed, breaking his concentration on Princess Daisy. Daisy took the opportunity to elbow him out of the way and shoved ahead. Ahead of them, Captain Toad was in hot pursuit of Mario and some blond Koopa babe Bowser didn’t recognize. But he certainly noticed how Captain Toad was still glowing with the radiant energy of a Power Star.

Spotting a more tempting target, Captain Toad screeched to a halt and reversed course, charging at Bowser. Bowser tensed, knowing that a Power Star in the hands of an enemy always spelled trouble, even for himself.

Then, Bowser heard a soft, motherly voice at the back of his head. *“Relax! You’re only a hop, skip, and a jump away from the exit!”*

“Huh?” Bowser glanced behind him, looking for the source of the voice, but there was no time to think about it!

Of course! He was more limber now.

Bowser leapt up and over the charging Captain Toad. The Captain sensed what was coming and sprang to intercept Bowser in mid-air. But Bowser did the splits, and avoided crashing into the invincible toad by an inch. Koopie-Koo skidded to a halt before crashing into a tall green pipe, knocking aside several Spinies on the way, but Mario hopped nimbly up onto the pipes and towards the exit. Daisy followed a second after Mario, ignoring the Piranha Plants that lunged from out of the pipes to bite them.

Over the years, Bowser had often wished Mario would just hold still and fight him like a man. But it suddenly occurred to Bowser that anything Mario and Daisy could do, he could now do. Bowser couldn’t just barrel through this course.

“You can’t keep trying the same thing, over and over, expecting different results,” whispered the soft voice.

Bowser stopped thinking, and leapt straight towards the first pipe, past the deadly Piranha Plants, which narrowly avoided chomping his buttocks. He felt heat building in the palms of his hands, and knew instinctively that the explosive power of the pink fire was his to command.

But Bowser didn't dive down towards the green warp pipe that marked the exit, like Daisy and Mario did. Powered by the force of two explosions, he leapt straight up and crashed his head through the ceiling above the exit pipe. Bowser felt the crown press down into his skull as he impacted against solid brick.

Below him, Daisy and Mario froze in shock as Bowser disappeared onto the floor above them, out of reach.

Tumbling roughly to the ground, Bowser clutched his throbbing head as he stumbled down the dim, hidden passageway. With every beat of his heart, it felt like the crown was biting into his noggin. "It has to be here! Peach based this on my castle, and my castles…always have an escape route!"

Chortling, Bowser dove feet first towards the hidden warp pipe that he was sure would take him home, and away from this nightmare…but Bowser failed to account for the width of his brand-new, feminine, child-bearing hips. With a dense "Thunk!" Bowser's rear end and tail jammed him inside the green pipe. With a roar, Bowser hopped up and down to try and squeeze through, only to squeal as his tail caught on the end of the pipe. Second guessing himself, he tried to pull himself free of the pipe, but it was futile. He felt like a cork inside a bottle.

Then, the green warp pipe started to hum and crackle with energy. It was trying to teleport his bottom half, but his top half was trapped!

Feeling the burning hot metal of the warp pipe press against his sizzling tail and butt cheeks, Bowser fought back tears and sucked in his gut. "Be a man!"

With a final thrust, he felt himself sliding down the pipe, a hairline crack forming in the green metal around him.

…

A tremor rippled through the floor, knocking Peach and Luigi to their knees. Floating in midair, Parakarry watched curiously. "An earthquake? But aren't the Mario Maker levels in mid-air?"

Peach felt her stomach clench. "It's not supposed to do that!"

Luigi's teeth chattered. "Not supposed to do that? Then what is it supposed to…do?"

His last word was interrupted as the floor gave out under his feet. Unaware of the effect the laws of gravity should be having on him, Luigi didn't fall immediately, until he glanced down and saw nothing below him, except for a steep drop down to the courtyard of Mushroom Palace. With a

wail, Luigi scrambled to reach safe ground. Flapping his wings furiously, Parakarry grasped Luigi and pulled him to safety.

Behind them, the entire structure started to tremble and fall away, the bricks disintegrating into pixels to reveal the blue sky outside the Mario Maker stage.

“Quick! We’ve got to find the others!” ordered Peach, before giving a sharp whistle, hoping Goombaria could hear them.

…

Goombaria watched in shock as everything unfolded on the monitor.

“I don’t think that’s part of the obstacle course!” squeaked Toadette.

Thinking quickly, Goombaria found the emergency button, and before she could second guess herself, she heard Peach’s piercing whistle. Goombaria slammed the big red button, and an electronic voice announced, “Manual s-safety activ-activ-activated.”

Goombaria tried to change the camera on the screen, and panicked as pixelated lines cut across it. The camera angle switched to the shaky hand camera operated by Spike the Lakitu.

On the screen, Goombaria could make out Koops the Koopa falling as the ground of World 1-1 dissolved beneath his feet, before he was caught in a floating bubble. Koops’ stuttered and stammered, as was his habit when flustered. “W-w-woah! That was, ah, a close…close one. Y-you…okay, Spike?”

“You did it, Goombaria! Great job!” cheered Toadette.

Goombaria sighed with relief.

Then, the bubble holding Koops burst, and he tumbled into nothingness.

…

Far below the Mario Maker, the good people of Toad Town went about their day.

Tayce T. Toad, the local chef, carried a basket of goodies to donate to the Toad Society for Widows and Orphans. She took a moment to look up and admire the incredible sight of the Mario Maker rearranging itself in the sky. “My, my, what will they think of next?

“Good morrow, Ma’dam Tayce T. Toad! Fancy our meeting…along the road!” chanted a deep, somnolent male voice, emphasizing the rhyme.

Tayce T. spun around to find her neighbor, the great and powerful Merlon, Toad Town's local magician and fortune teller. "Merlon? I thought you'd be reading fortunes this morning, what with all the travelers here for Peach's celebration for the Mario Bros.!"

Merlon folded his hands sagely, his magnificent mustache bobbing. "Ah, I had to step away from the crystal ball. Last night, I had a terrible nightmare that a roof would fall on my head today…either that or a turtle, the details are hazy, but I immediately knew it was a premonition. Something terrible is about to happen!"

"Well, if a turtle is going to fall on your head, shouldn't you shelter at home?"

Merlon shook his head. "Ah, but if fate has decreed that a turtle *is* to fall on my head today, it could just as easily happen to me whether I'm at home or out and about. But if the premonition really meant that my roof was going to collapse, then I shouldn't be at home."

"That makes sense. Though it's too bad your prophetic dreams can't be more specific."

"That's the trouble with premonitions. You're never quite sure what they mean until it's too late."

"Look out! The sky is falling!" screamed Minh T. Toad, the local vegetable gardener, pointing a gloved hand up at the Mario Maker.

A massive chunk of brick wall, the size of a Toad, careened through the sky, before smashing through the roof of Merlon's house, demolishing the building. Tayce T. Toad tackled Merlon, shoving him out of the way of a flying piece of debris.

An emergency alarm blared through the Bowser-attack-warning system, and the residents of Toad Town, Toads, Koopas, and Goombas alike, rushed to the emergency shelters.

"Sigh, I hate when I'm always right," groaned Merlon.

…

Mario cursed in Italian. He leapt at the ceiling, only to realize it was hopelessly out of reach. "Bowser! What did he do?"

Daisy gesticulated wildly to the giant hole above them, before finally noticing her underpants were showing and ducking behind the green pipe to preserve her modesty. "I heard an explosion, and he went crashing through the ceiling! …Yeep!"

Noticing the commotion ahead, Captain Toad called out behind him. "Princess Peach, Bowser's trying to break the boundaries!"

Peach's voice echoed from far away down the long corridor. "Whatever he's doing, stop him!"

Mario's mustache trembled. "Peach? I'm coming!"

Captain Toad shook his head. "No! You two go after Bowser, I'll check on Princess–"

But Mario didn't take orders from Captain Toad. Mario and Captain Toad backtracked to meet Peach, Luigi, and Parakarry. Mario and Toad arrived just in time to give Peach and Luigi a hand up as the floor collapsed beneath them, then the whole group charged towards the exit.

"Mario? I can't jump over these pipes!" shouted Koopie-Koo.

Holding hands, Mario and Peach gave each other a final, meaningful squeeze. Mario let go of Peach and snatched up Koopie-Koo, carrying her to safety.

Daisy hopped up and down in a futile effort to reach the ceiling. As an Olympic high jumper, Daisy's "hops" were usually over 6 feet high. But even after climbing up on the collapsed bricks to gain height, she was still a few feet short. "It's no use!"

Then, she saw Luigi sailing above the rest of the group. His long legs carried him just high enough to grasp the crumbling stone of the ceiling above. As it fell apart, Luigi kicked up and onto the second floor. With a final longing glance at Daisy, Luigi charged down the secret path in pursuit of Bowser.

Parakarry looked up and down. "Princess! I can go with Luigi, but I can't help any of you if you fall!"

Peach pointed to the hole in the ceiling. "You back up Luigi. Everyone else, take the normal exit!"

Daisy nodded and led the way.

Captain Toad used his best drill sergeant voice. "Princess Peach, you're next after Daisy!" Peach glanced at Mario once in terror, but knowing there was no time to argue, she obeyed the order.

As Mario set down Koopie-Koo, she cried, "But what about Koops? He was on the first–"

"Koopie-Koo!" cried a small voice from far away. It was Koops, dangling by his arms in the grip of Spike the Lakitu, who had lost his sunglasses in the chaos. Spike's pet cloud seemed to be struggling to carry the extra eight.

Most of the level behind them had disintegrated entirely. In a panic, Koopie-Koo's voice cracked as she screamed. "Koops! We've got to help him, Mario!"

Mario had to hold Koopie-Koo back before she could dive out into nothingness.

Above the din, Koops raised his voice, his usual stammering disappearing, “Koopie-Koo! You get in that warp pipe! Move your tail! Now!”

Koopie-Koo flew to obey, hiding in her shell and shooting like a bullet towards the exit.
After she disappeared through the pipe, Captain Toad ran to follow. But Mario froze as he heard Koops’ last words. “Um…Mario? The, uh, safety isn’t working. I could, ah, use a hand? If that’s okay?”

Mario was ready to rush back out, but the bricks of the last platform were already starting to tremble. He had no path to Koops.

“Dude! My arms are giving out!” hissed Spike, his eyes bulging.

Koops nodded to a trailing piece of debris below them. Already, it was starting to drift downward, fighting weakly against gravity. “You could drop me on that, maybe? Better do it right about…now–”

Spike held out valiantly, his arms giving out as Koops uttered the word “now.” Kicking off the debris, Koopa launched himself into the air like a bullet, catching a second piece of debris in midair, and angling a final shot towards Mario. Any Koopa could achieve incredible speed thanks to the magical properties of their shells, but few could control their momentum. Luckily, Koops had practiced the art of aiming his power shell attack daily, until it became second nature to him. He spiraled like a football into the waiting arms of Mario, who caught Koops and dove headfirst into the warp pipe. Just as the two friends vanished through the pipe, the pipe itself shook and fell into nothingness.

Spike breathed heavily, his arms numb, when a jarring alarm blazed in his ear. He nearly fell off his cloud, before he snatched up his Mailbox SP.

“This is Spike. Spike, the Lakitu.”

“Lakilester? It’s me, Goombaria! Thank goodness! I tried to press the button, just like Peach said, but there’s an error message. Bowser broke something!”

An electronic voice echoed over the remains of World 1-2. “W-world 1-3-4-1-L-is-real-2-4-0-1 L-Loading. Missing No. World 0-1 Loaded. I AM ERROR!”

Spike cringed at the mention of his real name, before whipping out his backup pair of sunglasses…for emergencies. “You and Toadette go find help. This looks like a job for Spike…Spike, the Lakitu!”

[End of Chapter VI]

Bowsette's Princess Lessons:
Chapter VII: Panic in the Mushroom Kingdom
By Yu May

Just when Bowser was sure his tail would surely catch on fire, he shot feet-first out of the warp pipe inside a stone chamber, on a collision course for a set of wooden doors. Twisting in mid-air, Bowser took the brunt of the impact on his spiked shell, smashed through the doors, and came rolling to a stop on the stone entrance way of the castle. "Ha! Free at last! Thank *me* almighty, I'm free at last!"

Then Bowser noticed the defensive moat that surrounded Toad Town, nearly a 500-foot drop below him. "D'oh! I'm still stuck in Peach's silly obstacle course!" Glancing around, Bowser spotted blocks crumbling and falling away in the distance. "That's where I came from? Excellent! It's all falling apart! Hopefully Mario and…uh…the green Mario brother...What's his name again?"

…

Within the warp pipe, Luigi howled as he felt the hot metal start to burn through his overalls.

"This looks bad, Luigi!" cried Parakarry, immediately behind him. The hairline cracks in the pipe's metal surface were starting to glow, and spread like cobwebs all around them.

"W-we're gonna' make it!" cried Luigi, not sure if he believed it.

…

Bowser counted on his fingers as he struggled to remember the name. "Lou…Louis? Lou-wussy? It's on the tip of my tongue!"

"Luigi?" said a soft voice at the back of his head.

"Yeah, that's right, Luigi! What a pansy, am I right?" Bowser snarled with delight, before doing a double-take at the sound of the voice behind him. No one was there.

Bowser shook his head. "Anyway, hopefully those twerps get to do a little skydiving, without a parachute!" Then he remembered that Princess Peach was with them, and the thought of her tumbling to her doom felt like ice in his stomach. "Peach will be fine! She must have some safety precautions in place. But if I finish her little obstacle course in record time, I'll be back at the castle first. This is perfect! By the time they catch up, I'll be long gone!"

He'd miss his chance to spank Daisy for losing their bet, but the opportunity to escape was too enticing. Stretching his legs, Bowser prepared to run the obstacle course. "Funny? There's usually supposed to be an enemy Lakitu on this level. At least, there always was when I played *Super Koopa Cousins* with the kids. Ha! This is going to be even easier than I thought!"

There was a flash of light and a crack from within the castle. Bowser ducked as two greenish shapes went whizzing over his head.

The first green missile turned out to be Luigi, who went sailing towards a green pipe. A Piranha Plant leapt out of the pipe, smacking its lips at the scent of an approaching meal. But Luigi crashed against it with such force, the Piranha Plant was uprooted and sent tumbling down to the moat below.

Immediately behind Luigi, Parakarry used his wings to pull up and out of the way of the incoming obstacles. He grasped for Luigi, but it was too late!

Luigi smashed head-first into the floating brick on the other side of the pipe, spiraled wildly up and over the obstacle, and finally landed flat on his back, a few feet below the brick that had been kind enough to slow him down.

That likely would have been the end of Luigi, had not the brick fortuitously contained a red Power Mushroom, which plopped helpfully into his mouth as he lay gasping for air. Luigi's head shot up as he gagged, then he swallowed the mushroom. Swooning, Luigi fainted, unaware that the strengthening power of the mushroom was now coursing through his veins.

Bowser leapt lightly up onto the green pipe and pointed down towards Luigi. "You followed me? Ha! Just when I was worried this was going to get boring!"

Parakarry trembled, but flew in between Bowser and the unconscious Luigi anyway. "Not another step, Bowser! Or you'll have to go through me!"

Bowser snorted. "That's not much of a threat. I don't even know who you are."

"I helped Mario f-fight you before! I-I'm P-Parakarry, and I'm…um, I'm a mailman?"

Bowser roared with laughter. "Bwa ha ha! Aw, you're shaking in your wittle shell! Too bad Mario's not here to help you now!"

Parakarry glanced back at Luigi, wishing Mario was here. As the Mario brothers' mailman, Parakarry had gotten to know Luigi pretty well over the years. He knew that Luigi had saved Mario several times, and that although most people made fun of Luigi, Mario never once did.

Catching Parakarry's nervous glance, Bowser pressed his advantage. "Move aside, puny Parakoopa. I won't tell anyone. It's not like you can stop me!"

Parakarry remembered the time he and Mario had infiltrated the castle of Bowser's henchman, the Invincible Tubba Blubba.

At the sight of their enemy, Parakarry alone had started to panic. And even in his female form, Bowser was still more intimidating than Tubba Blubba had ever been.

Back then, Mario had spurred Parakarry on. But Parakarry didn't have Mario here to help him now.

"I don't care if I can stop you! I am a mail man! And it's my job to face any danger that threatens the Mushroom Kingdom postal service…which you're sort of doing, indirectly!"

Bowser shrugged, then inhaled sharply, planning to torch Parakarry with a quick burst of his dragon breath. But once again, he felt the flames flicker and die in his throat. "Burp! Man! I've had heartburn all day. Was it something I…ate?"

Bowser hesitated as he noticed Luigi stumbling to his feet, punch drunk. Thanks to the mushroom, Luigi was noticeably taller and sturdier than he'd been a few moments ago. Stumbling forward, Luigi slammed his fist into the green pipe Bowser was standing on, shattering it. Bowser leapt for safety, then tucked and rolled to break his fall.

Just as he stood up, Bowser felt Parakarry dive bomb him from above, smacking into the crown, which dug deeper into his bruised, throbbing skull. *"Why can't a nice guy like me ever catch a break?"* thought Bowser.

…

Daisy, Peach, Koopie-Koo, and Captain Toad emerged from the warp pipe first.

Daisy whistled. "That was close!" Then she glanced down and finally noticed that her "Hi! I'm Daisy!" underpants were showing. "Oh no! I lost my shorts!" Daisy covered herself, her face beet red. "But that means…Luigi saw me in my underpants!"

Noticing Daisy's dilemma, Peach pulled a yellow sash from her fanny pack and offered it to Daisy. "Here, Daisy! Use this!"

Daisy sighed with relief and quickly tied the sash around her waist. "Thanks, Peach. You're the best! Now I don't have to worry about…Oh no! What about Mario and Koops? That's way more important than my underpants! We have to go back!"

But to everyone's relief, Mario and Koops popped up from the pipe behind them.

Koopie-Koo dove into Koops' embrace, kissing him. Peach rushed to Mario's side, wanting to kiss Mario. But remembering her Princess manners, Peach squeezed his hand instead. "You both made it!"

Mario nodded. "Koops says the safety program has failed."

Captain Toad shook his head, gravely. “Toadette and Goombaria will have noticed we’re in trouble. So that means the emergency failsafe must be broken as well!”

Koopie-Koo snapped her lips away from Koops. “What? So you knew that there was nothing to catch you when you ordered me to leave you behind and save myself?”

The adrenaline rush fading, Koops rubbed his head sheepishly. “Well…uh…you see…we only had a few seconds…and you know I, ah, tend to stammer when I get flustered? So I figured I’d better, ya’ know, get to the point, before–”

Koopie-Koo silenced him with another smooch. “You did the right thing. We’ll talk about it later!”

Peach quickly wiped away her tears, forcing herself to think. “This is my fault. I knew those old level designs had hidden warp pipes, so I just hid them behind brick walls when I programmed the course. I never expected Bowser to go barreling through solid walls like that!”

Mario sensed the guilt in Peach’s voice. “Don’t blame yourself, Princess. We’ll get through this. We just need to stick together and–”

Behind them, the warp pipe started to tremble, and with a crack it fell away into nothingness.

Peach gestured ahead to the second flag that marked the end of the course. “Move!”

Thinking quickly, Princess Daisy snatched up Koopie-Koo, guessing correctly that the Koopa would have trouble leaping up and over the brick steps ahead of them.

Making sure no one was left behind, Mario snatched up Koops. Everyone dove past the finish line, ignoring the flag, all thoughts of bonus points and winning the race no longer a concern.

Mario called from the back of the group. “Peach? Why is the course falling apart? Is there anything we can do to stop it?”

Peach shook her head. “When Bowser broke the boundary to the hidden warp pipe, he must have glitched the code. It’s trying to load two levels at once!”

Daisy stiffened. “So what happens if Bowser finishes the obstacle course first?”

“I don’t know. Let’s pray we don’t find out. It could shut down the entire obstacle course, with us still on it!”

The red brick road stretched ahead of them in a straight line, until it terminated in mid air. Above it flashed the words: “World 1-3.” The spotted mushroom-heads of towering toadstool trees arose to greet them. Their only way forward was to leap across them, one by one.

“Are there any more hidden warp pipes?” gasped Mario, struggling under the weight of Koops.

Peach bit her lip. “There are two more Bowser could use, if he remembers them. If he came out in World 4, that means he’s only one stage away from them. One of them would take him to World 8, near the end of the entire course!”

With her free hand, Daisy pointed toward the horizon, still supporting Koopie-Koo over her shoulder. Nearly a mile ahead of them, the Mario Maker was rearranging the pieces of the obstacle course into a new level. “But, look how far ahead they are!”

Mario shook his head. “It’s all up to Luigi!”

Daisy’s eyes went wide. “Luigi has to fight Bowser alone? Bowser will murder him!”

Mario met Daisy’s eyes. “Daisy, you can count on Luigi. You can trust him with your life! Cuz’ my little brother will never, ever let you down!”

Calming her breath, Peach landed on a floating beam of red steel, then leapt up to the final set of toadstool trees. The flag that marked the end of World 1-3 was in sight. “Mario’s right, Daisy! And Luigi isn’t alone. He has Parakarry to fight at his side. So let’s focus on–”

A green and white egg flew through the air past Peach’s head, exploding into a thousand shards of tiny egg shells as it impacted the ground at Mario’s feet.

“Gonzales! I’m calling you out!” squeaked a little kid’s voice, standing on a floating steel beam above their heads. A rock and roll anthem started to play, and as the flying platform slowly lowered to their eye level, the speaker came into view: Gonzales Jr., the Yoshi kid.

Throwing his fists into the air, the youthful Yoshi roared his challenge in a passable imitation of Macho Man Randy Savage. “Ladies and gentlemen! The moment you have been waiting for! At long last, The Great Gonzales will face his greatest foe yet! His former sidekick: The Great Gonzales, Junior! The student against the master. It’s the Match of the Century!”

Daisy looked askance at Mario. “Mario? Is your last name Gonzales?”

Mario sighed. “It’s a long story, ya’ see–”

“Let’s get ready to rumble!” roared Gonzales Jr. as he dove down to crush Mario with a devastating, and well-rehearsed, hip drop attack.

Mario set down Koops and caught the little Yoshi easily. “Junior! There’s no time! The entire obstacle course is falling apart! This is an emergency!”

“Huh? Really?”

Gonzales Jr. noticed the world falling apart behind them. “Yowza! Okay, Gonzales. We’ll call it a draw. Hop on my back! I’ll get you out of here!”

Mario shook his head. “I’m fine. Take Koops instead.”

Despite being half Koops’ size, Gonzales Jr. darted around and under Koop’s legs, easily lifting him up onto his back like a loyal steed. “Aces! Quick, Koopie-Koo, hop aboard!”

Daisy raised an eyebrow as she ran alongside the teeny-tiny professional wrestling Yoshi. “Huh? You can’t possibly carry her.”

“Are you calling me fat, Daisy?” teased Koopie-Koo.

“Wah? No! Look at him, he’s tiny!”

Gonzales Jr. saluted, somehow having no problem keeping pace with his short legs. “No worries, Daisy, my dude! Koops’ will carry Koopie-Koo, and I’ll carry Koops, so it’s fine!”

If only Luigi was there to see the confused look on Daisy’s face, he’d have found it adorable. “...But…how can–”

Koops’ smiled reassuringly and held out his hands. “It’s fine, Daisy, I think I can carry my bride-to-be!”

Seeing that a giant leap was coming up, Daisy decided there was no time to argue, and handed Koopie-Koo to Koops’ in a rush. “Okay, okay! Just watch out for that–”

“LET’S ROCK!!!” With a roar, Gonzales Jr. sprinted forward, easily clearing the jump with both turtles on his back, landed on a floating steel beam and vaulted all the way to the finish line in a single bound, stylishly snatching the flag from the top of the pole on his way down.

The rest of the group stuck the landing, and followed Gonzales Jr. to the next track. Daisy was stunned into silence.

Peach beamed, and nodded to Mario. “You know Mario, I really like your friends! We should have them over more often!”

[End of Chapter VII]

Chapter VIII: The Appropriately-Named and Conveniently-Placed Janitor's Closet

Princess Daisy looked ahead to the horizon, trying to mentally calculate how far they still had to go. Her mental calculations were not giving her much hope. "Even if Luigi buys us some time, we're still two whole worlds behind Bowser."

Mario said nothing.

Captain Toad took the lead, knocking enemies aside to clear a path. "We'll have to make record time! Follow my lead, as fast as you can!"

Princess Peach, Princess Daisy followed, along with Gonzales Jr. (carrying Koops and Koopie Koo), and Mario bringing up the rear. Spike "Lakilester" Lakitu flew alongside the group, ready to catch the first person who fell. "Um, dudes, I'm only going to be able to catch one person, so could you all go as fast as you can, as carefully as you can!"

Ahead of them loomed the great stone castle, bearing the legend: "World 1-4." Its towering gates and shadowy windows gave it the look of a monstrous, stone-faced giant.

Princess Daisy grinned. "This fortress is full of all sorts of terrifying, deadly traps! …I can't wait!"

Immediately, the castle crumbled into rubble, seeming to fade into nothingness as the stones began to fly away to rearrange themselves further down the course.

Princess Peach pointed through the debris. "The Mario Maker must be trying to load the next world's fortress level! It's disassembling the castle to acquire the building materials it needs!"

Mario paled. "But what about Watt? She was supposed to be waiting in that castle as part of the obstacle course!"

A delightful, childish giggle echoed through the empty sky. They looked up and saw a small ball of energy, as bright as the sun, with an adorable face, sucking on a pacifier. It was Watt the Sparky! "Weee! Mr. Mario! Look'it me! I'm flying!"

Two gigantic cornerstones, each the size of an elephant, smashed into Watt on either side. Watt was only a toddler, but since she was also a ball of sentient, living electricity, she was entirely invincible. "Weeee! Aha ha, ha, that tickles! Do it again!"

Mario winced, then groaned as he watched Watt slam against stone pillars, wooden stakes, and boiling hot lava. She was positively beaming with joy the whole time, but Mario still felt like a terrible babysitter. "Watt! Be…careful…young lady?"

Watt stuck out her tongue and blew a raspberry. "Tee hee hee! Whatta' you gonna' do? Spank me?"

“I will if he won’t, little missy!” barked Princess Peach.

Watt’s eyes went wide. She hated spankings. After all, they hurt! “Sorry, Princess Peach! I’ll be good! What do you want me to do?”

Peach pointed to a pillar of fire and a double bladed axe that were both spiraling in Watt’s direction. “Just be careful, and watch where you’re going!”

If Watt had hands, she would have been saluting. “Aye, aye, Princess! You can count on me!”

Watt narrowed her eyes, focusing all her attention on being careful, and avoiding danger. The pillar of fire crashed over her like a wave, followed by the axe, which snapped in two as it smashed against her determined face. Watt cheered in delight. “See, Princess? I’m being super careful, now!”

Princess Peach sighed. “There’s nothing else we can do for now. Keep running!”

Mario made a mental count of everyone he needed to save at the moment, a habit he had formed over many years of diligent practice. “Then we’ll need to warn Mrs. Sushie, Madame Flurrie, Ms. Mowz, Lady Bow, Vivian, Bombette, and Admiral Bobbery!”

Ahead they could clearly make out World 4 loading. Koopie Koo pointed to the horizon. “Mrs. Sushie went to the moat in World 2. Madame Flurrie and Ms. Mowz set up an ambush in World 3, and Lady Bow and Vivian are haunting a fortress level! They should be safe, for now!”

Daisy huffed, as if the world collapsing around her was a minor annoyance. “That’s great, but it also means Bowser skipped past all of them. They won’t be able to hold him back!”

Koops interjected, concentrating to overcome his habitual stammer. “Admiral Bobbery and Bombette will get a chance! They were in World 4.”

Spike’s eyes went so wide, they could be seen behind his incredibly cool triangular shades. “Uh, Dudes? What if they attack us?”

“Then we will defeat them in honorable combat!” roared Gonzales Jr.

Koops started to get flustered. It occurred to him that both his own life, and his bride-to-be’s life, were in Gonzales Jr.’s teeny-tiny little hands, at this very moment. “Um, when we see them, someone better tell them to not attack us, preferably someone good at…talking? So…er, can we please not attack them, Gonzales, Jr.?”

Gonzales, Jr. boomed with equal dramatic emphasis. “Okay! We will not defeat them in honorable combat! We will tell them to join forces with us, and use the strength of our eternal friendship to defeat Bowser in honorable combat!”

Without having to worry about the obstacles in the castle, our heroes charged across the bare red brick foundation that marked where the fortress formerly stood. As they passed the end point of level 1-4, they rushed past a hologram of a Toad retainer, ignoring it.

The hologram started to say, “Thank you, Mario! But our Princess is in another castle!” before it stuttered, froze, and blipped out of existence.

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The air around the Mario Maker actually rippled from the radiant heat. The icons on the user interface stuttered, then reloaded with corrupted text.

Goombaria panicked as she realized the stylus to control the panel was on a delay. “What-do-I-do-what-do-I-do-what-do-I-do?”

Toadette bounced up and down in terror. “Use the keyboard to type control, alt, delete, then force quit any unnecessary programs!”

“That’s it! Duh, Goombaria! Toadette, you know more about the Mario Maker than I do! You do…whatever you just said, I’m going to get help!”

Toadette quickly switched places with Goombaria at the control panel and began to type. “Help? From whom?”

Goombaria flashed a buck-toothed grin. “From the best big brother in the whole wide world…if I can just get him out of bed!”

…

Luigi threw back his fist, preparing to land an overhand punch on Bowser’s jaw. But as he saw the trembling, slender body of his opponent, and the pained expression on the feminine face, Luigi couldn’t see Bowser. Rationally, Luigi knew it had to be Bowser, despite his current feminine form. But subconsciously, Luigi saw Princess Peach’s face. Checking his blow at the last instant, Luigi slammed his fist into the ground at Bowser’s feet, pulverising the red brick platform beneath. “J-Just give up, B-B-Bowser! Don’t make me hurt–”

With a high-pitched roar, a pink candle flame sparked to life at the end of Bowser’s tongue. Luigi sensed the danger, and dodged to one side. Luigi felt the bullet of pink flame before he saw it, grazing across his cheek like a thin wire, hot as iron. After the bullet shot past Luigi, it ripped through three question mark blocks in a row.

As he realized how naturally he was able to control the deadly flame attack, Bowser was simultaneously thrilled by his mastery of this new ability, and annoyed by Luigi's luck. Spinning wildly, Bowser smashed his spiked tail into Luigi's chest, hoping to throw Luigi off balance. Luigi would have hurtled to his doom, had he not clutched Bowser's tail in a tight embrace. To his terror, Bowser felt Luigi's weight pulling him toward the edge of the platform, and clawed at the brick floor with his pointed fingernails. "Hey! Leggo, you lunkhead!"

Luigi glanced down at the hard pavement 500 feet below, and squeaked with fright. "N-no, thank you!"

"Well, f__k you, Luigi!"

The grating sound of nails scraping against stone made them all flinch. Alerted by the sound, Parrakarry arced in midair to divebomb toward Luigi, grabbing him by the suspenders of his overalls to lift him back up.

Bowser, whose face had turned blue from holding his breath, gasped with relief as he felt the heavy weight pulling at his tail relax. Immediately, Luigi started spinning Bowser in a tight circle by the tail, just like he and Mario had done countless times in the past. Luigi went silent as his fighting instincts activated. He knew everyone was counting on him! He had to take down Bowser! But then, Luigi noticed Bowser's new, feminine, cartoon-heart-boxer-clad buttocks wriggling in the air before him, and his subconscious betrayed him yet again.

Ever the gentleman, Luigi quickly released his grasp on the "woman's" tail, stammering apologies and averting his eyes. The centrifugal force sent Bowser flying through the air further down the course, heading towards the flag that marked the goal post.

Below him, Bowser could dimly make out a little, round, pink, screaming thing.

"Bowser incoming! Bombs away!" roared Bombette, the Bob-omb, as she dive bombed forward to intercept him, igniting her fuse.

Wide-eyed, Bowser felt his tail smacking against Bombette's face, before a fiery explosion sent him shooting straight up, cracking his skull against the question marks above him with such force, it flattened his head down to meet his shoulders. (Fortunately, Saturday morning cartoon and video game characters can take that kind of punishment in stride.)

Bowser slapped back down onto the brick below, chin-first. "Ooch! My throbbing head! My stinging tail! My aching…everything!"

Bombette, who always went flying when she blew her top, crash-landed a few feet ahead of Bowser, her eyes dazed.

Admiral Bobbery appeared at her side. “Bombette! Are you hurt? How many fingers am I holding up?” Admiral Bobbery held up zero fingers on his invisible hand.

Oblivious, Bombette began singing the lyrics to *My Bomber Lies Over the Ocean* in a dazed, yet oddly sweet, warble: “One night as I lay on my pillow…my batman awoke me and said…‘I say there are ships in the channel…and bags of black cloud overhead!”

Snarling, Bowser arose to his feet. “Grawr! Bob-ombs? I’m surrounded by traitors! I thought King Bob-omb was supposed to bring you duds in line!”

Admiral Bobbery scowled, his magnificent mustache shivering with manly rage. “I owe no allegiance to your puppet king, Bowser. We are proud, free Bob-ombs!”

“Bring back, bring back, oh, bring back my bomber and me, and me! Bring back, bring back, oh, bring back my bomber and me!” crooned Bombette, with all her might, rolling onto Admiral Bobbery’s manly, perfectly spherical shoulder.

Bowser grinned, and with a click of his tongue, felt the pink flame spark to life again. “What a pity. I could have used an Admiral…Guess I’ll have to settle for a fireworks show.”

Admiral Bobbery tensed as he saw the pink flame in Bowser’s throat pointing like an arrow towards his own fuse.

“So I climbed in my bloody old bomber! And I took off right dead into wind! And I searched the whole length of the channel! But no bloody ship could I find!” sang Bombette.

Luigi erupted from the ground, just behind and below Bowser, and tackled the feminine King of the Koopas to the ground. Bowser’s fire tore through brick and stone, leaving a clean hole behind. Bombette began to sing the chorus as a refrain: “Bring back, bring back, oh, bring back my bomber and me, and me! Bring back, bring back, oh, bring back my bomber and me!”

Parrakarry shouted a warning as he slammed into a question mark block, revealing a fire flower right behind Luigi. Snarling, Bowser spun on Luigi, charging another bullet of pink flame. All at once, Luigi grasped the fire flower, Bowser shot a bullet, and Luigi held up a hand to shoot a fireball. Bowser’s pink flame was easily swallowed by Luigi’s green flame, and ricocheted back with force towards Bowser’s face, the force of the two attacks feeding into one another. Clenching his teeth, Bowser ducked back into a limbo pose and felt the hot flames grazing right past his new set of inconveniently large boobies. Kicking wildly, Bowser slapped his bare foot uselessly against Luigi’s chest, and felt a shiver travel down his spine. He wasn’t strong enough to handle Luigi?

Since he was very young, Bowser had developed the habit of coaching himself, whenever he encountered a problem that seemed impossible, whether it was overcoming an enemy, or wooing Princess Peach. *“C’mon, Big Guy! You can do this! It’s just Luigi!”* thought Bowser.

“Brute force won’t work! You’re outmatched! Run, you dumbass!” screeched the far-away, feminine voice. Dimly, as though in a dream, it occurred to Bowser that he had heard that woman’s voice somewhere before. But in the heat of battle, Bowser had no time to dwell on the voice inside his head.

Spinning lightly away from Admiral Bobbery’s embrace, Bombette skipped and pirouetted towards the fighters. “So I turned ‘round and headed for England…just thinking of coffee and bed…The controller said ‘How come you missed them?’ And I’ll leave you to guess what I said!”

“Bombette? Wait!” barked Admiral Bobbery, sprinting after her.

When he reached her, Bombette spun him into an absurd, stumbling waltz. “Bring back, bring back, oh, bring back my bomber and me, and me!”

Luigi grasped Bowser’s frail, delicate ankle in his gloved fist. “Bower, you’ve gotta’ listen to me! If you don’t stop–”

Bombette glomped into Bowser’s chest, tripping a horrified Admiral Bobbery, who was pulled into the dogpile. The two Bob-ombs each smacked their perfectly round faces against one of Bowser’s massive, perfectly round boobs. Still punch drunk, Bombette’s fuse lit as she finished her song on a high note. “Bring back, bring back, oh, bring back my bomber and me!”

Perfectly on cue, Bombette exploded again. Luigi shielded his face, but was still forced to stumble backward and off the floating platform.

The force thrust Bowser downward, through a layer of floating brick, to the floor below. He bounced once on his shell, spiraling, and came to a stop when he crashed the back of his head against the base of a green Piranha plant pipe. “Rraargh! I’m gonna rip the next thing I see into tiny pieces of confetti!”

The Piranha plant inside snapped up reflexively, looking for a meal, took one look at the Queen of the Koopas, and ducked backinside its pipe to hide.

Bombette and Admiral Bobbery flew into the air in a perfect 90 degree vertical angle, and plopped right back down to the platform where they had been before. Bombette shook her head. “Whew! What a nice nap! Say, Admiral, have Mario and the gang shown up yet?”

His eyes spinning, Admiral Bobbery began to rap the lyrics of the 2012 indietronica song *Blond Bombshell* by Owl City:

“That blonde, she's a bomb, she's an atom bomb.
Rigged up, and ready to drop!
Bad news, I'm a fuse, and I've met my match.

So stand back, it's about to go off!”

Bombette cradled Admiral Bobbery gently, her eyes wide with loving concern. “Oh no! My poor Admiral! He’s shell shocked!”

Bowser clung to the pipe for support and willed himself to stand up, every bone and muscle in his body screaming in pain. He wanted to rip and tear. To crush anything that got in his way. Then he spotted Luigi, stumbling to his feet with equal difficulty. As the power of the Fire Flower emanated through him, Luigi’s clothes changed color to dazzling white and green.

Bowser had lost plenty of fights in his life. But never once, even in defeat, had Bowser ever felt like he was the weaker fighter, compared to Mario. On the few occasions Bowser had fought Luigi, he had always treated the green-clad Mario brother as a secondary concern, the lesser threat.

But at the sight of his foe, Bowser knew he didn’t stand a chance. In terror, Bowser scampered toward the flag, narrowly ducking under one of Luigi’s green fireballs as it flew an inch over his head. The second fireball struck Bowser full on the tail, and he leapt forward clutching the scorched remains of the seat of his black dress.

The King of the Koopas was running for his life…like a scared little girl.

…

Toadette felt every agonizing second of delay as the Mario Maker’s user interface froze, then loaded the task manager. After closing out background programs, Toadette loaded the graphics card settings and diminished the resolution of the texture packs, anything that would take strain off the overclocked operating system. The screen blinked, and stuttering footage of Team Mario appeared, running at only 2 frames per second. Toadette exalted with relief as she spotted the entire crew, safe and accounted for, along with Spike the Lakitu.

Behind Toadette, the door to the castle walkway flew open, and Goombaria sprinted through, leading out a pajama-clad trio: Goombario, Goombella, and Kooper. “Toadette! I woke ‘em up!”

Toadette shrieked, as her heart skipped a beat. Everyone winced at the shrill sound. “...Sorry, I had no idea working with computers could be so nerve-wracking!”

“Have you tried turning it off and on?” mumbled Goombario, as he yawned and blinked blearily.

Toadette glanced nervously at the reset button on the Mario Maker. “But if I do that, everyone will die!”

Goombario shook his head to clear his vision, feeling stupid. “Good point, don’t do that!”

Kooper examined the stuttering footage on the screen, sternly. “How can we help?”

Toadette shivered as she saw her friends narrowly leaping past the ledge that led to world 2-1. “I’ve tried minimizing the strain on the Mario Maker 2’s CPU. But there’s nothing else I can close!”

Goombella, yawned, smacked her lips, then finally seemed to wake up. “Wait, the Mario Maker 2? So, is there a Mario Maker 1?”

Toadette nodded, scrunching her face in concentration. “Yeah, I think it’s in the janitor’s closet.”

The conveniently-placed janitor’s closet, which was decorated by a wooden sign that declared it to be “The Appropriately-Named and Conveniently-Placed Janitor’s Closet,” was right inside the castle tower, only a few feet away from our intrepid heroes! Inside said closet, said intrepid heroes discovered a cardboard box containing a dusty video game console, along with cords, controllers and game pads, and a smaller Question Mark Block.

Goombaria whistled. “Phew! Is that a Wintendo Wii U? Totally retro! This thing looks ancient!”

Kooper was taken aback. “Huh? But, the Wii U’s still a pretty new system, isn’t it? Retro is more like…the Super Wintendo Entertainment System, right?”

Goombario shrugged, somehow, even without having any visible shoulders. “What are we supposed to do with this?”

Goombella frowned. “I figured if the problem is the Mario Maker, like, breaking down, maybe we could, like, ya’ know…use another Mario Maker?”

“Ugh! What am I saying? Goombario must think I’m a total, complete, legally-blond bimbo!” thought Goombella.

Goombario flashed a buck-toothed grin. “Goombella! You’re a genius! We’ll just…aim the Mario Maker at where they are, and–Pew! Pew! Pew!–Fire a bunch of clouds at them to catch them if they fall!”

“But how are we gonna’ aim it?” inquired Goombella.

Goombario froze. *“Oh no! I’m such an idiot. Goombella must think I’m a total dorkus, dingus, MacDoofus!”* he thought.

Kooper snapped his fingers. “Maybe I can help with that. Toadette, are the building blocks in the Mario Maker uniform, across both versions?”

Toadette nodded eagerly. “Yeah! The ‘tiles’ are always a five foot by five foot cubic square!”

Kooper pulled out a graph paper journal and began sketching. “Then that means I can calculate their rough distance away from the castle. All I need is a copy of the game world map. Are they available anywhere?”

Goombella pulled out her laptop. “Yeah, all the maps are based on *Super Koopa Cousins*. You can download the files from…” Goombella stiffened, as the words “Brown Sugar Pirate Bay” appeared on her screen, then snapped her laptop shut. “...Um, you’d have to buy them, legally, from Wintendo’s e-shop, exclusively on the Wintendo Switch.”

Toadette narrowed her eyes. “But…we need them on a Wii U? And Windtendo shut down the Wii U eshop years ago.”

Goombario nodded absent-mindedly as he blew the dust off the ancient Wii U. “Actually, it’s surprisingly easy to mod a Wii U. All we’d need is to–”

Goombario choked on the rising cloud of dust, and hurriedly stuffed the Wii U back into its box. “Kaff! Do what Goombella said! Which is to legally purchase a copy of *Super Koopa Cousins* for the Wintendo Switch, then after we connect it to the Mario Maker 2 we can…uh oh.”

Goombario froze as he overheard a metal panel collapse off the side of the Mario Maker 2, belching a thick cloud of black smoke. Fortunately, it was still running, as evidenced by the fact that its patented 3D rumble feature was causing it to vibrate with such force, it was emitting an ominous humming noise.

Toadette snarled. “What is wrong with you guys? We’ve got to act now! Why can’t we just use the Wii U?”

Goombella’s eyes started to water. “B-but, Toadette, pirating video games is illegal!”

Goombario took a step back from the Wii U, as if afraid it would bite him. “Yeah, and Wintendo doesn’t take kindly to anyone hacking into their hardware, let alone running rom-hacks of their old software!”

Kooper paused from his cartography calculations, a sweat bead dripping down his brow. “Wintendo is infamous when it comes to defending their intellectual property. I heard they once sued Bowser…and ever since…even *he’s* been afraid to mess with them!”

Goombaria swallowed a lump in her throat, as big as a chestnut. “But, everyone is counting on us! Mario, Luigi, Princess Peach, Princess Daisy, and all of our friends! Their lives are in mortal peril…”

Toadette nodded slowly, as she continued Goombaria’s sentence. “...and the only way to save them…”

Goombella opened her laptop, and hovered the mouse over the torrent download link for the ROM for *Super Koopa Cousins*. “...is to download a pirated video game…”

Goombario retrieved the ancient Wii U from its cardboard box, his invisible hands trembling. “...then hack into this Wii U…”

Kooper’s knees were knocking as he finished the sentence. “...and load the maps we need on unauthorized, homebrew software.”

The friends looked at one another, and nodded. They knew there was only one right choice. “Let’s-a go!”

That’s right, dear reader: it is okay to pirate Wintendo games. It is always morally correct.

All together, they worked as one. Kooper attached the Wii U’s AV cables to the small Question Mark Block, then positioned it, meticulously measuring it with a level to ensure that it was perfectly flush with the larger Mario Maker 2. “All set! I’m ready for the maps on my end.”

Goombella started copying the pirated ROM of *Super Koopa Cousins* onto a SD card, glanced at the glitching screen of the Mario Maker 2, then flipped her laptop to face Kooper. “Here they are! Looks like Mario and the gang are in World 2-1. Goombario, there’s a copy ready for you too.”

Goombario typed furiously on his own laptop, which was connected to the Wii U. “It’ll take me a few minutes to install the Homebrew Channel, then we can load the maps.”

On the screen of the Mario Maker 2, they saw Spike the Lakitu dove toward a hidden block, revealing a secret, magical vine that sprang high into the air, toward the clouds. They could barely make out his garbled voice, behind static. “There’s–*kiksht*–shortcut–*krrrk*–way! Up–*koosht*–vine!”

Kooper silently ticked off the number of tiles for the first few maps, doing the multiplication in his head before jotting each number down, then pulled out a protractor to check his angles. “I’m going to aim the Mario Maker 1 so that it leaves a path just to the left of the collapsing obstacle course. As long as it’s flush with the Mario Maker 2, our friends should be able to see it and leap to it…”

On the screen, they could see most of their friends scaling the vine, Captain Toad in the lead, Mario bringing up the rear.

Goombella shuffled her feet, not sure what more she could do. “But if it’s off by even a hair, the cloud path will either angle farther and farther away from the obstacle course, or crash into it!”

“Exactly, so it’d be better if we design a level that’s as simple as possible. We don’t need to recreate the levels from scratch, we only need a cloud pathway that corresponds to them, by length.”

Toadette raised her hand. “I think I can do that! I’ve used the level builder for the Mario Maker 2, at least.”

“What else can I do to help?” asked Goombella.

Toadette pointed toward the console of the Mario Maker 2. “There’s an ice machine in the servant’s quarters. If the Mario Maker 2 overheats, it could kick out at any moment!”

Goombella nodded, trying to keep calm, then gently nudged Goombario to follow her. “Got it! I saw it on the way over. Goombario, you help me fetch ice and a fan for–”

The image on the screen flickered once, and when it came back, Goombaria screamed in terror at the sight.

As the ground collapsed below the magical vine, the brick it was attached to began to spin wildly in mid air. Mario was clinging to the tail end of the vine by one hand when it began to twist on itself, and the whip-like force sent him flying.

Peach's eyes widened with horror as she threw out a hand, but there was no hope of catching him. "Mario!"

Then the vine snapped cleanly in two, just above Captain Toad’s head.

The image on the screen stuttered a final time and froze. It was as if they were all suspended in mid-air, the moment before the law of gravity would take its course, and send them all tumbling toward their doom, along with Mario.

[End of Chapter VIII]

Bowser's Princess Lessons:
Chapter IX: The Cloud Superhighway
By Yu May

Alerted by Peach's cry, Spike the Latiku dove like a hawk to catch Mario, his emergency sunglasses flying off his head into nothingness.

As the magical vine ripped in two, Captain Toad launched himself up to snatch at the frayed end above him with his left hand. The vine went taut with a snap, and he felt the combined weight of Princess Daisy, Gonzales Jr., Koops, Koopie-Koo, and Princess Peach, along with the five-foot cubic block of solid brick that represented the base of the magic vine, all straining against his right arm. Captain Toad was known to have a rich, deep voice, by Toad standards. But as he felt the weight, he screamed until his voice cracked and went high. "Aowwaaaaarrhgh!"

Daisy noticed his distress, and did the only thing she could think of: scale the vine to take some of the extra weight off the struggling soldier. "Hurry! Up the vine! A.S.A.P.!" barked Daisy.

Koops swallowed, holding onto his beloved fiance with one arm, and onto the teeny-tiny baby Yoshi with his other arm. "Gonzales Jr., can you make it?"

Gonzales Jr. took sharp breaths as he pulled one tiny arm over the other, still carrying the weight of two full-grown Koopas on his back. "I fear nothing, *brother!* No pain, no gain!"

As the vine began to untwist, spinning them all in the opposite direction, Peach was forced to cling for dear life, tears forming in her eyes as she shut them tight. She couldn't bear to watch Mario falling to his doom.

"I…gott'im!" wheezed Spike the Lakitu, his eyes bulging as he lifted Mario vertically, at a break-neck pace of just under 1 mile per hour.

"I'm fine, Princess! Please…just climb!" roared Mario.

Her head swimming, her arms shaking, Peach began to scale the vine. Above her, she could see Daisy lifting Gonzales Jr. up and onto the safety of the shortcut in the clouds, and Captain Toad, dead to the world, except for his death grip on both ends of the broken vine.

"Don't give up, Captain," sobbed Peach as she climbed past her loyal Captain of the Guard.

Peach felt Daisy yanking her roughly up and onto the ledge. "You're clear, Captain! Grab my–"

The magical cloud they stood on broke free of the pathway. Everyone, including the cloud itself, had a dumb-struck expression frozen on their face.

Daisy and Peach stumbled back reflexively, and would have tumbled into nothingness along with Captain Toad, had Gonzales Jr. not reacted so quickly. Launching himself into danger, the baby Yoshi seized each Princesses by the collars of their shirts, one in each hand. Not only do all Yoshis have incredible stamina, they also have the ability to defy gravity by running furiously in mid air, for a few precious seconds. Even as a baby Yoshi, Gonzales Jr. possessed these remarkable gifts. But carrying two fully grown princesses, along with two fully grown Koopas, pushed the little guy to his absolute limit. “Hut! Hooooooooo!” he roared, his eyes bulging as he pedaled his feet to overcome the forces of nature itself, and pull everyone to the safety of the next cloud.

As Captain Toad fell, his eyes fluttered open. Had he fainted? Was he dead? In his hand, he saw he still held the frayed end of the vine. Just as Princess Peach had asked of him, he had not let go. Closing his eyes, Captain Toad let his body relax, as if he was floating on a river. He had obeyed his final order. He would die with his honor intact.

This incredibly poignant (and not-at-all-chessy) dramatic death scene was interrupted when Princess Peach fumbled for a red mushroom in her fanny pack and chucked it like a fastball pitch. “Captain Toad! Eat…the…mushroom!” roared Princess Peach, with queenly authority.

As the mushroom smacked against his face, Captain Toad awoke from his heroic final thoughts. He glimpsed a tiny building far below him, and as it grew rapidly to fill his entire field of vision, he scarfed down the mushroom in one bite.

…

Professor Toadsky wrote in chalk on his blackboard, as he lectured to his Philosophy 101 class. “According to the philosopher Jean-Jaques Rousseau, ‘Whence do I get my rules of conduct? I find them in my heart. Whatever I feel to be good, is good. Whatever I feel to be evil, is evil.’”

A Mushroom Kingdom University student raised her hand, nervously. “But, Professor Toadsky, wouldn’t that idea, if applied consistently, reduce all moral law to mere subjective experience?”

Professor Toadsky puffed his magnificent toothbrush mustache as he leaned against his prized mahogany desk. “Ah, such a simple question! Of course, Rousseau did not believe in moral relativism. Rather, he understood that all people are naturally good, and are only corrupted by the evils of society and its laws, in contrast to Thomas Hobbes, who viewed man’s nature as selfish and depraved: ‘a war of everyone against everyone.’”

“So, basically, it’s a question of whether people are basically good, or whether people are basically bad?”

“That’s rather reductive, but sure, let’s simplify it for the sake of argument. Do you really suppose that Thomas Hobbes is correct, that man, in his natural state, is universally corrupt?”

“Well, no.”

Professor Toadsky waved his hands dramatically. “See! Then that means that people are all basically good! Now, if you don’t mind–”

Unperturbed, the student continued hopping up and down in her seat with her hand aloft, but didn’t bother to wait to be called on, “But wouldn’t that be a false dichotomy? Just because I don't think all people are universally corrupt, that doesn’t mean I have to think all people are universally good either.”

Professor Toadsky gestured to his name on the blackboard. “Who’s teaching this class?”

The student wilted, looking abashed. “Um…you are, Professor?”

“Exactly. I’m trying to teach you kids how to think for yourselves! To question authority! And it’s impossible to do that when you’re interrupting my brilliant discourse. Philosophy is all about engaging with ideas, in their pure, abstract form. We really don’t need to be worried about the outside world, nor their petty, plebeian concerns here. This is a safe space, where we’re free to question our assumptions about culturally-constructed concepts such as the supposed ‘battle between good and evil,’ without fear of judgment. So, kindly shut your trap, and let me–”

Captain Toad crashed through the ceiling from above, leaving behind a perfect mushroom-shaped silhouette, then through the floor below, sending a wide eyed Professor Toadsky tumbling down, along with his prized mahogany desk. The philosophy professor’s piece of chalk flew into the air, then plummeted after them.

SLAMMO!

“...Ow.” Captain Toad felt the power of the red mushroom draining from his body, then lifted himself out of the crater he had left in the concrete foundation of Mushroom Kingdom University's Fungal Social Studies building.

A tornado-warning alarm blared through the university, and an old, mustachioed security guard directed a crowd of confused students. “This is not a fire drill! Find the nearest tornado shelter area and bunker down!”

Recognizing the security guard at once, Captain Toad leapt out of the crater and snapped to attention with a salute. “Captain Toadster? Sir!”

The old toad’s mustache, which easily rivaled Mario’s in its magnificence, curled as he spotted the young soldier crawling from the crater. “Huh? Private Toad? Where’d you come from?”

“I fell from the sky, Captain Toadster!”

“Oh, none of that military brass twaddle, Private. I’m not a Captain anymore. I am *retired*, and you’re…what was your rank again, Private?”

“Captain, Sir!”

“I told you, don’t call me–Oh! You mean you made captain, Private? Congratulations! Guess that makes *you* Captain Toad, now! Friends call me Toadster, so that means I’m Toadster to you…so, at ease, sonny! My stars, they make a fella’ Captain and he starts crashing through–”

Toadster did a double take as he remembered the giant hole in the ceiling. “Great horny toads! You fell out of the sky? All Toad Town is in a state of emergency, on account of the sky’s falling and all. You know what’s going on?”

“Yes, sir! Bowser was permitted an opportunity to join morning exercises on the Mario Maker, and is now attempting an escape. His interference caused the Mario Maker to malfunction and begin to collapse.”

Professor Toadsky crawled onto his hands and knees, rubbing his aching lower back. “Bowser’s out of his cell? Who in the hell authorized that?”

Spitting with rage, Professor Toadsky shook his fist as he paced back and forth. “Oh, don’t tell me, I already know! It was her royal Highness, wasn’t it? Oooooh! Just wait until the Council of Elders hears of this…”

Toadster scowled. “Now’s not the time, Professor. Captain Toad, you’re the ranking military officer. The people of Toad Town need you.”

For a moment, Captain Toad felt the urge to argue, and ask the retired captain to take command of the situation. He remembered the days in boot camp, when Toadster had been his drill sergeant. But Captain Toad also knew there was no time for false modesty. “Yes, sir! Toadster, you keep directing these kids to the tornado shelter. Professor Toadsky, you help!”

Professor Toadsky’s toothbrush mustache bristled. “Me? But I’m an intellectual!”

But Toadster clapped Profesor Toadsky on the back and led him away before the professor could start lecturing properly.

Marching out of the university building, Captain Toad surveyed the scene of Toad Town. A few buildings were billowing smoke, but the damage wasn’t as wide-spread as he’d feared it would be…yet. Glancing up at the sky, Captain Toad spotted another brick dropping away from the obstacle course. As a soldier, his first duty was to serve and protect the royal family. His second duty was to serve and protect the people of Toad Town. He couldn’t help Princess Peach right now. “Mario, Luigi, take good care of her…And Princess Peach, Princess Daisy, you take care of each other, too. It’s all up to you now.”

Captain Toad charged towards the nearest ruined building, seeking any one who needed help.

…

After setting the two princesses down safely, Gonzales Jr. heaved his tiny chest, gulping for air, before roaring in his best Hulk Hogan stage voice. “I’m a machine! I’m unstoppable! I’m invincible! I’m inexhaustible! I’m…I’m…tireless…”

Gonzales Jr. collapsed onto his face. His heart was big and strong, but he was still only a baby yoshi, after all. Daisy cooed with sympathy as she scooped up the heroic, professional wrestling infant. “Aw! Poor ‘wittle guy! You’re all tuckered out!”

“M’not…a…baby…” muttered Gonzales Jr. as his eyelids grew heavy.

Daisy soothed Gonzales Jr as she let him nestle against her shoulder. “No, you’re not a baby. You’re a brave little man! Now get some rest!”

“M’kay…” Gonzales Jr.’s head spiraled one final time, before he drifted off to sleep in Daisy’s tender embrace.

The cloud platform they were standing on began to tremble. “Kah-kah-k-keep running!” stammered Koops.

Peach forced herself to look away from the distant ground below, where Captain Toad had fallen. She could only hope the power mushroom had been enough to save his life. “Can you and Koopie-Koo keep up?”

Sensing that her husband-to-be was getting flustered, Koopie Koo answered for him. “It’s a straight shot! As long as we don’t have to do any jumping, we should be okay!”

With a final surge of effort, Spike the Lakitu threw Mario toward the pathway in the clouds. Mario landed on his feet and immediately began to sprint alongside them.

Koops spluttered. “A…s-straight…sh-shot? That’s it! Mario! Remember the Koopa Surfin’ Switch Star technique?”

Mario grinned. “Say no more! Daisy, Peach, can either of you surf?”

“Do what?” squeaked Peach. Once, years ago, she’d wanted to learn to surf during their vacation at Delfino Plaza, but then Bowser had shown up and…well, you can imagine how that had interrupted her plans.

“I can totally surf!” squealed Daisy, still hugging Gonzales Jr. securely against her bosom.

With a curt nod, Mario sprinted up behind Peach and easily scooped her up and into his arms. “Then follow my lead! Koopie-Koo, you’re with Daisy!”

Koopie-Koo grinned. “Roger! I think I know what you’re up to!”

Peach blushed as she felt herself held tight against Mario’s manly chest. She could feel his heart beating like a drum. “What? What *are* you up to? Hey! Put me–”

Koops dove forward, ducking his head into his turtle shell, and began to spin wildly in front of them. Mario lightly leapt into the air, aiming towards Koops.

Peach understood what was about to happen the moment before it happened. There were two things Peach hated: heights, and wave-like motion. “Oh no! I don’t like this! This is a bad ideaaaaaa–”

As Mario landed on Koops, Koops took off like a rocket, skidding across the cloud pathway. Mario stood steady, carefully balancing his feet to ride Koops’s shell, like a surfboard. Peach sank her face against Mario’s shoulder in terror.

“Oh yeah! I *love* this! This is a great ideaaaaa–” roared Princess Daisy, as she instantly mastered the art of Koopa surfing on top of Koopie-Koo.

Far behind them, Spike hung over the edge of his cloud, his arms spasming. “Guh-ha? Wait for me!”

Spike’s cloud buddy huffed and puffed as it struggled to catch up with the rest of the group. “Puff, puff, Poofy! Huff tuff puff!” gasped the cloud. [Translation: “It’s no use, Lakilester! I can’t go on!”]

“Don’t give up, Puff! All our friends are counting on us!”

“Piff puff! Ruff puffle poof puff!” [Translation: “I can’t do it! I’m just a little rain cloud! I’m not cool like you!”]

“That’s not true, Puff! You’re super cool! Believe in yourself! And if you can’t believe in yourself, then believe in me, who believes in you!”

“Piffle puff! Poof puff nuff huff!” [Translation: “Balderdash! That makes absolutely no sense!”]

“What do you mean? It makes perfect sense! You don’t believe in yourself, but you believe in me, who believes in you. And if you don’t believe in the me, who believes in you, then believe in the you, who believes in yourself!”

“Nuff puff!” [Translation: “That’s even more confusing!”]

Realizing this was getting him nowhere, and that he was missing his incredibly cool, emergency sunglasses, Spike pulled out even-cooler-ultimate-emergency-emergency sunglasses, with triangle shaped lenses. “Oh, forget it! Here! Take my emergency-emergency sunglasses! They’re, uh, magic! Yeah, that's it! They’ll give you super strength!”

“Puff puff! Poofle ruff ‘n’ tuff puff!” [Translation: “No, Lakilester! Those are your coolest, sickest pair of shades!”]

Spike shook his head, before placing the emergency sunglasses over Puff’s eyes with a flourish. “You need them more than I do, Puff!”

The awesome cosmic power of the triangular sunglasses, or perhaps the placebo effect, was instant. With an explosion of lightning, Puff surged forward after the group, looking incredibly cool while doing it.*

[*Note from the author: This entire scene, which is a giant, nerdy anime homage, was of course accompanied by the song *Rap is Man's Soul! Believe in You'n the Restless Dude Showing the Sky, Listen to Kamina's Theme with Ears Wide Open!!* by Iwasaki Taku, because it’s my imagination and I can do whatever I want.]

With a spectacular explosion, Spike and Puff burst forward to catch up with the rest of the group. But they had been left far behind.

Up ahead, Mario, Peach, Koops, Daisy, Gonzales Jr., and Koopie Koo all shot off the edge of the cloud shortcut like two bullets, flying toward the end of world 2-1. Peach forced her eyes open. “We need to grab the flag to load the next level!”

“I can’t do it! I’m carrying a baby!” wailed Princess Daisy.

“We’ve got it covered! Peach! Keep your eye on the flag!” boomed Mario, as he spiraled Koops into a barrel roll.

Yes, I know, you’re probably thinking this is a “Do a barrel roll!” reference from *Star Fox,* and you’re likely getting ready to tell me that it’s technically called an aileron roll, but Mario did an actual, literal barrel roll, since Koopas don’t pilot as tightly as Arwing fighters. Plus, they needed a bit of extra height to reach the flag. So, take that, nerds!

Peach reached out, snatched the flag, and the words “World 2-2” flashed in the sky above them, along with a booming, computer voice which announced the next obstacle course had loaded.

Daisy rolled her eyes as she spotted the expanse of water floating in the sky before them. “Ugh, it’s the freakin’ underwater level!”

Mario smirked. “Don’t worry, we’re skipping it!”

The explosive forward momentum took them halfway across the expanse of water, but as the two Koopas began to gradually decelerate, they all felt their stomachs go weightless as gravity began to take its course.

Below them, a school of menacing Cheep-Cheeps and Bloopers popped their heads out of the water, ready to pounce.

Daisy clenched her teeth. “We’re not gonna’ make it!”

Mario’s eyes were calm, his voice stern. “We’re gonna’ make it!”

A thunderclap from Puff announced the arrival of Spike the Lakitu, as he snatched Daisy and Mario’s collars from behind. “Believe!!”

As Koops and Koopie-Koo felt the last of their momentum disappear, they popped out of their respective shells and grasped at Mario and Daisy’s legs. Spike and Puff’s lightning burst of speed carried them the rest of the way across the expanse of water, just out of reach of a massive Cheep-Cheep before she could snap at them.

They all skidded across the top of a brick platform and leapt toward the flag, which Peach snatched, before they came tumbling and rolling to a halt at the end of the course. Mario’s hat went flying off his head as he twisted in mid air to break Peach’s fall.

Daisy heaved a sigh as she patted the snoozing baby Yoshi on the small of his back. “Peach, you ever think how fun it would be to have a baby?”

“Not now, Daisy.”

“Oh, yeah, definitely not now, while we’re all in mortal peril. I meant generally!”

The computer’s electronic voice echoed above them. “World 2-2 Com-com-complete. Loading World 2-3…Lo-lo-loaded!”

Before them stretched a long expanse of suspended rope bridges. Below them lay the raging river and moat that surrounded the fortress walls protecting Toad Town. Ahead of them, a single Cheep-Cheep exploded out of the water, into the air above the bridges, spitting out a bullet of water with such explosive force, it ripped through a wooden plank with ease.

Mario lifted himself to his feet. “Mrs. Sushie is out there. We’ve got to warn her before she gets hurt!”

Spike the Lakitu twiddled his thumbs. Without his sunglasses, he always felt like he was plain, old Lakilester. “Or before she hurts us…”

Daisy put a finger to her mouth. “Not to mention that monster-sized Cheep-Cheep. You know, Big Bertha. She’s actually quite nice, when she’s not trying to kill us!”

Mario retrieved his hat and fixed it back in place. “It won’t come to that. C’mon. Let’s-a go!”

[End of Chapter IX]

Bowser's Princess Lessons:
Chapter X: Big Bertha Breaks Bad
By Yu May

It took Goombaria a few minutes to calm herself down, even with Toadette's help. After Goombella fetched the ice and fan to cool down the Mario Maker 2, the image on the screen flickered back to life. "I can see them! They must have found a way to reach the cloud shortcut!"

Toadette stared at the screen in a daze. "But…Captain Toad isn't with them."

Goombario wiped the sweat from his brow as he finished installing the homebrew software. "Toadette, the Wii U is ready. Can you build us a map?"

Toadette didn't even blink. "He's gone…Captain Toad…he fell…"

Kooper grasped Toadette by the shoulders, gently, but firmly enough to snap her out of her daze. "No, I refuse to believe it. Captain Toad is a survivor. We have to act under the assumption that he is still alive. And even if I'm wrong, our friends are still counting on us. Princess Peach is counting on you, Toadette."

Toadette shivered, then seemed to wake up. "You're absolutely right. I'm sorry everyone. Let's get this map ready to go."

Goombella navigated to the map builder on the gamepad, before passing it to Toadette. "It's, like, just a straight shot, right? Assuming Kooper's aim is totally perfect, that is!"

Toadette shook her head as she began constructing a map level on the smaller Mario Maker. "Not quite. The courses are arranged along a straight horizontal path, heading due east, but their vertical height varies. See those fortress walls? After that point, the path dips down toward the castle moat that protects Toad Town."

"In that case, couldn't our friends, like, just dive into the moat for safety?" asked Goombella.

"It's still a 200 foot drop. That's fatal, even when falling into a bed of water. Not to mention the moat is infested with territorial Bloopers and Cheep-Cheep. I'll have to adjust the pathway I'm creating accordingly."

"What happens if you're off?" asked Kooper, looking up from his measurements.

"The Mario Maker won't construct a map if it encounters a solid object as an obstacle. We'll lose valuable time."

"Time which we can't spare. Here, take my notes on the obstacle course's dimensions."

Toadette smiled as she took Kooper's notes, still adjusting the custom map on the Wii U with her free hand. "Perfect…"

A few, surprisingly tense moments passed as Toadette tapped the screen with a stylus. "...There, it's ready."

Goombario squinted. "That fast? You're sure it will work?"

Toadette crossed her arms, looking pleased with herself. "I'm positive. All I needed was a straight, brick pathway, with a few tweaks to the height at specific points, which I just double checked. You know what they say…"

Goombaria flashed a goofy grin. "All toasters toast toast?"

Looking stern, Toadette put her hands on her hips. "No. 'Measure twice, cut once.'"

Kooper chuckled, as adjusted the position of the Mario Maker 1 by a fraction of a millimeter, glancing at his compass. "Amen to that! The Mario Maker 1 is ready to go. We've only got one shot at this. So, please, no one touch it…or lean against the wall it's sitting on…or sneeze in its general direction…"

Toadette pressed the confirmation button on the Wii U game pad, and the antique Mario Maker 1 buzzed to life, its decorative question marks glowing from within. Then it burst open, releasing a tornado of tiny specks that quickly grew to full-sized cubes of interconnected red bricks. Everyone ducked to the far side of the tower, watching the spectacle in awe. Goombaria peeked out nervously from behind her big brother, and saw the pathway steadily take shape, until it vanished behind the great fortress walls in the distance.

They watched in stunned silence, until Kooper clapped his hands together, looking devilishly pleased with his work. "Excellent! Goombario? After you, my jolly good fellow!"

Goombario glanced back at Kooper, and the two shared a knowing smile, like two brothers sharing a joke. "Ah! But Kooper, my testudinian companion, I must insist…age before beauty!"

Goombaria harrumphed. "What are you silly boys talking about?"

Goombario stuck out his chest. "Kooper and I are going after Bowser to rescue our friends, of course!"

At this news, Goombaria was literally hopping mad. "What? And leave me here? Don't you dare! I'll tattle on you, mister!"

Goombario blushed, as his little sister successfully blew up his plans to look cool and heroic. "Goombaria, it's my duty, as man!"

Goombaria pouted. “Well, then it’s my duty, too! I’m coming with you!”

Goombario spluttered. “I can’t bring my little sister into a battle!”

“Why not? You’re saying I can’t help, just because I’m a *girl?”*

Goombario was so momentarily devastated by this shocking accusation of sexism, he couldn’t speak. But before the argument could escalate, Goombella intervened, crouching low to speak with Goombaria at eye level. “No, Goombaria, that’s not what he’s trying to say. You’re his little sister, which means he feels responsible for you. It’s sort of like he made a promise to your mom and dad: to look after you, and make sure you come home safe. Isn’t that right, Goombario?”

Goombario had just enough time to think how, yes, that pretty much *was* what he was trying to say earlier, only expressed more eloquently. “Sure, if–”

He was just about to thank Goombella for helping him say what he was thinking, but Goombella didn’t pause long enough to give him time to say what he was thinking. “If Goombario lets you put yourself in danger, it’d be like he’s breaking his promise to your parents. You don’t want that, do you?”

Tears sprang to Goombaria’s eyes, “Well…no! But, if I can’t come…who will look after Goombario, and make sure *he* comes home safe?”

Goombella flashed a toothy grin. “I will, of course!”

Toadette snatched up a first aid kit and threw it over her shoulder. “I’m coming, too. I’m no fighter, but I know first aid. Kooper, Goombario, Goombella, you should know exactly what we’re walking into…”

Toadette gestured at the trembling, steaming remains of the Mario Maker 2. “This is life or death. Plan A is to get our friends onto the emergency escape path. But if that fails, for any reason, then the only way to escape this death trap is for everyone to reach the final level at the same time. If Bowser gets there first…it’s Game Over.”

The words “Game Over” seemed to hang in the air above their heads.

Toadette hugged Goombaria. “Goombaria, you’ll have the most important job of all. Watch the screen, just like Princess Peach asked us to, and when you see we’ve all made it safely across the finish line, hit the emergency reset button again.”

Kooper flashed a thumbs up. “Near certainty of death…small chance of success…what are we waiting for? I’ll have to use my power shell to catch up with the others. Can you all Koopa surf?”

“I can,” said Toadette, as she scooped Goombella up with one arm.

“My stars! You’re, like…surprisingly strong, Toadette,” observed Goombella.

Before Toadette could scoop up Goombario in her other arm, Goombaria grabbed onto him from behind. “I love you, Goombario.”

Goombario was desperately trying to not think about how he must look like a giant dork in front of everyone, but he accepted his little sister’s hug, then turned around to return her embrace. “I love you, times two, Goombaria.”

Goombaria sniffled, and was tempted to argue with her brother further, but finally let him go. Toadette snatched up Goombario as easily as if he were a doll, and cradling both goombas in her arms, she lightly hopped onto Kooper’s back. With a whoosh Kooper propelled forward with his power shell technique. Toadette’s pink pigtails fluttered behind her as they rushed down the long path toward nothingness.

Goombaria took her station in front of the Mario Maker’s emergency switch.

As she watched the screen flicker back to life, Goombaria whispered, “I love you times infinity, plus one, big brother.”

…

“Bombette! Admiral Bobbery! Bowser’s trying to escape, and he broke something! The entire obstacle course is collapsing!” roared Luigi as he scooped up Bombette and Admiral Bobbery, and sprinted after Bowser.

Parakarry glided along-side them, his wings flapping like a hummingbird. “We’ve gotta’ stop Bowser before he reaches the Warp Zone in world 4-2, or all our friends are doomed!”

Bombette winked. “Wow! Great recap, fellas! Now I’m all caught up on the action!”

Luigi held up Bombette, looking at the perfectly-pink, perfectly spherical bob-bomb girl almost apologetically. “Miss Bombette…may I have your permission to throw you? You know, like a bomb?”

“Oh, you want to use me as an improvised explosive device? I’m flattered! That’s the highest compliment you can pay to a Bob-Bomb! Of course, you have my permission! Chuck me right at that ne'er-do-well! But, please, give Admiral Bobbery some time to recover. I think he’s still a little rattled…”

Admiral Bobbery’s eyes spun dizzily as he sang to himself in a loopy voice. “Cause I’m T.N.T.! I’m dy-na-mite! T.N.T! And I’ll win the fight!”

Admiral Bobbery sang this particular song because he was extremely old; so very ancient, that he actually listened to 1970s rock songs growing up.

Before Admiral Bobbery could sing enough of the song to get us all sued, Luigi interrupted. “Got it! Get ready, Miss Bombette! Mario and I used to call this trick: ‘The Fastball Special’!”

As Luigi wound up his arm, leapt into the air, took aim at Bowser’s ample backside, and pitched Bombette like a fast ball, she exploded in fits of booming laughter. “Wheeee! Kah, ha, ha, hoo! I *love* this comic book stuff!”

Bowser felt the hairs on the back of his graceful, feminine neck stand on end. “Huh?”

With a whack, Bombette came crashing to a halt against Bowser’s buttocks, before making her own dramatic explosion sound effect: “Ka-boom!”

Leaving behind a trail of smoke as he flew through the air, Bowser came rolling and skidding to a halt. “Argh! Why is it always my *butt* that gets hurt?” whined Bowser.

Bowser tensed as he saw Bombette whizzing into the sky, her squeal of delight sounding exactly like the whistle of a firework rocket, before crash landing on the brick stairway before the flag goal post. Luckily, Bob-bombs are never lastingly hurt by their own explosions. Not so luckily, Bower snapped out of feeling sorry for himself as he spotted the flag goalpost. “Yes! World 4-2! There’s another warp zone in there…somewhere. Just get there, and I can blow this popsicle stand!”

A shadow glided over Bower’s head as Luigi leapt up and through the air toward the flag, landing next to Bombette atop the stone staircase. Luigi set down Admiral Bobbery next to the swooning Bombette, then stood tall.

For dramatic effect, Parakarry came soaring down, perching on Luigi’s outstretched arm like a loyal falcon returning to his falconeer. As the sun shone behind them, they both looked incredibly cool. Bowser held aloft a dainty hand to shield his eyes from the radiant light.

Luigi held up a defiant finger. “Not one more step, Bowser! If you want to escape, you’ll have to step over my dead body!”

Bowser snorted. “Deal.”

As his temper rose, Bowser tried to summon his classic fiery breath again, but as before, his body didn’t respond the way he expected. He felt the flames spark to life, but this time they gathered around his…feet? “Huh?”

A pillar of pink flame erupted from Bowser's bare feet, blasting him into the air. Luigi could only gatch a glimpse of the sunlight, reflecting angrily across the rose gold surface of the Crown of Queen Toadstool, before Bowser crashed head first into Luigi's stomach. Parakarry was left standing in midair, glancing down at the empty spot where Luigi had been only a moment before.

As the sharp points of the crown dug deep into his solar plexus, Luigi gagged. He felt the wind knocked out of his lungs, and with a poof, the magic of the fire flower dissipated. The force of the blast sent both combatants careening back toward the flagpole, which snapped cleanly in two as they ripped through it. As the flag fluttered to the ground like a dying bird, the Mario Maker's computerized, stuttering voice echoed across the sky. "World 4-1 com-com-complete! World 4-2-2-2-loaded-2-2-2-2-2…"

…

Peach rifled through her fanny pack, and found the fire flower she had saved for emergencies. As she gripped the flower, it vanished with a poof, and her tennis outfit transformed to red and white. "Follow me! I'll clear a path through the Cheep-Cheep! Mario, Spike, you provide a rear guard. Make sure no one gets left behind!"

Koops wheezed as he gave his darling Koopie-Koo a leg up the tall stairway. "We…koopas…will be just, um, fine…If we can just…get up these, er, stairs?"

After Mario and Spike helped both Koopas reach the top of the stairs, the entire group sprinted down the long, narrow, wooden bridgeway. Peach led the way, with Daisy close on her heels, still cradling the exhausted baby Yoshi. Koops and Koopie-Koo quickly caught up, using their power shells to glide weightlessly along the straight path. From the rear, Mario saw the first two Cheep-Cheep shooting into the air from the waters below to attack Peach, followed by four more, then eight. "Cheep! Cheep, Cheep! Cheep-cheep-cheep-cheep!"

Peach threw fireballs as fast as she could, managing to knock out six of the first wave of foes. "Mrs. Sushie! Can you hear me? Call off the attack!"

Daisy was forced to duck to avoid a Cheep-Cheep which dove at her face. Another Cheep-Cheep leapt high and spat a stream of steaming water like a bullet, which Koops and Koopie Koo both swerved to avoid. Spike threw the endless supply of red Spinies he kept stored inside his helpful cloud buddy, and managed to knock out a few more Cheep-Cheep before the last one latched to his face, smooching him furiously. He spluttered as he pulled away from the big-lipped fish. "Ugh! Cooties!"

There was a haunting silence as they all sprinted down the long, empty pathway. Then, an eerie melody began to build from below, and they knew the swarm had awakened: the cries of a thousand Cheep-Cheep built to a rumbling roar, and in a watery explosion, the second wave appeared. Eight attacked Princess Peach all at once, correctly identifying her as the primary

threat, while another eight attacked randomly. Peach managed to blast aside half of her attackers, and side-stepped attacks from another four on all sides, but the last Cheep-Cheep aimed a bullet of water squarely at Peach's chest, and with a poof, the magic of the fire flower was destroyed as it absorbed the lethal attack.

Mario ignored the stitch forming in his side as he sprinted to catch up. "Mrs. Sushie!"

There was an echoing explosion from all sides as 32 Cheep-Cheep dive bombed into the air. Koops and Koopie-Koo rocketed forward to knock aside two of the deadly flying fish blocking their path. Daisy shielded Gonzales Jr. against her chest as she leapt and ran zig-zags to avoid multiple streams of boiling water. Without the magic of the fire flower, Peach was now weaponless. Nevertheless, as Peach spotted a Cheep-Cheep launching itself at Daisy, she skidded to a halt and elbowed the enemy aside. With a high-pitched squeal, the Cheep-Cheep slapped Peach with its tail fin, knocking her to the ground. With a poof, the last of the magic power protecting the Princess was exhausted.

"Mrs. Sushie!" roared Mario. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted an incoming Cheep-Cheep, and recognized her voice.

"Mario!" cried Mrs. Sushie as she came in for a crash landing. She landed with a sharp bump, and immediately began hopping alongside Mario. "You're in terrible danger!"

"Mrs. Sushie! The entire obstacle course is falling apart! The emergency system is dead!"

"What? That's even more terrible danger!"

"You've gotta' call off of this attack, right now!"

"I tried! That's what I came to warn you about! These local Cheep-Cheeps are nuts! I don't think they understand the concept of 'pretend fighting'! And Big Bertha can't seem to understand a word of my Jade Jungle dialect."

Spike trembled as he heard the name of the legendary Queen of the Cheep-Cheeps. "...Big Bertha?"

A dense boom echoed across the plains of the Mushroom Kingdom. A wave of 64 Cheep-Cheeps attacked at once, and Mario instantly spotted "Big Bertha." She was the size of a house, and her narrow eyes flashed behind a pair of triangular sunglasses. "CHEEP-CHEEP!" boomed the great fish, in a sonorous, reverberating voice.

Then she easily knocked aside Spike as she smashed through the planks wooden bridge, separating Mario from the rest of the group ahead.

Spike went into a death spiral, before deftly piloting his puff cloud to avoid crashing into the waters below. “Woo! I’m the Top Gun!”

But before Spike could start playing *Danger Zone* on air guitar, another Cheep-Cheep flew at his face, and started kissing him passionately. “Agh! Not my perfect face! Mmmffph!”

As Peach pulled herself back to her feet, she saw everything, her voice shaky as she cried. “Mario!”

Mario clenched his fists as he watched the wooden planks tumble away. “Do not stop, Princess! Get to safety!”

Mario couldn’t see the look of stubborn fury on Princess Peach’s face as she stood and charged back to help Mario. Daisy skidded to a halt, and reversed course. “Hey! What’re you doing, Peach? Mario says to keep running!”

“Last I checked, I’m the Crown Princess of Mushroom Kingdom, and I’m going to help Mario!”

“Well, last I checked, I’m the Crown Princess of Sarasaland, and I’m going to help you!”

“Daisy, you’re carrying a baby!”

Daisy skidded to a halt again. “Oh, yeah! Great argument, Peach. I’ll save Gonzales Jr. and you go save your man!”

Peach’s face flushed. “*My* man?”

“Talk later!” cried Daisy over her shoulder as she sprinted back toward the flag goal post.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Sushie held up her fins, waving frantically at Big Bertha in her Jade-Jungle-Cheep-Cheep dialect.. “Cheep! Cheepi-cheep!” [Translation: “Stop! They’re friendly!”]

Big Bertha splashed back into the waters below, and reemerged, bellowing in her Mushroom-Kingdom-Cheep-Cheep dialect. “Cheep-cheep! Cheep, cheep cheep!” [Translation: “Attack! Kill the intruders!”]

As Big Bertha puffed up her cheeks, Mario knew she was preparing to fire a missile of water. Ignoring the broken bridge, Mario leapt forward to grab one of the rope handles, which were still intact. The stream of water ripped through the wooden planks where Mario had been standing a moment before, and he began to cross the expanse, putting one hand over the other. In the back of his mind, Mario knew that he was an easy target for Big Bertha. It would be like shooting fish in a barrel, except in this instance, the fish was doing the shooting.

Mrs. Sushie dove across the expanse, in a desperate attempt to distract the monstrous Big Bertha. “Cheep, cheepity-cheep!” [Translation: “No! He’s not your enemy!”]

But her cheeps fell on deaf ears.

Big Bertha shot into the air, knocking aside Mrs. Sushie and snapping her jaws at Mario. Swinging like a trapeze artist, Mario dove for the suspension rope on the opposite side of the collapsing bridge, an instant before Big Bertha ripped through the first rope, snapping it in two. Mrs. Sushie tumbled, spiraling, to the river below. A ripple traveled through the wooden bridge as it lost half of its support, leaving Mario dangling by one hand.

Peach caught herself before the wooden planks fell away beneath her feet. “Mario! Take my hand!”

Mario’s face shone with relief, before he remembered that Peach had just put herself in more danger. “Princess! I told you to–!”

Big Bertha fired a jetstream of water, which tore through the wooden planks between Mario and Peach.

Peach shook her head as she gave Mario a hand up. “Talk later!”

The plucky plumber and the persistent princess both managed to inch forward a few feet before the river exploded below them and Big Bertha flew toward them, her jaws wide open to swallow them whole.

And they would have been swallowed whole, had Mrs. Sushie not shot out of the river to intercept Big Bertha in mid air, crashing into the great fish’s stomach. The impact threw off Big Bertha’s aim, and she sailed over Mario and Peach’s heads, snapping her buck teeth ferociously.

As the two fish tumbled back toward the river, Mrs. Sushie shook her fin furiously in the larger fish’s face. “Cheepy-cheep-chippy-cheep-cheep!” [Translation: “Don’t you *dare* hurt those poor children!”]

Big Bertha eyes blazed with righteous anger as her sunglasses went flying. “Cheep? Chee-peepy-cheep-peep-cheep? Cheep, cheep!” [Translation: “What? They want to hurt *children?* I’ll kill ‘em!”]

“Cheep! Cheep-cheepity-cheep, cheep-cheep!” [Translation: “Aw, fishsticks! If only we spoke the same language!”]

Mario and Peach saw Mrs. Sushie land safely back in the river, but knew they couldn't dawdle. Thanks to the half-collapsed bridge, they were forced to sidestep along the rope, one agonizing step at a time. Mario glowered at Peach. "I told you to get to safety!"

Peach held her nose high, somehow managing to look like a monarch while also running for her life. "And I will, right after I get *you* to safety!"

"Princess, I can't help you if you're stopping me in the middle of the fight to argue about it!"

"I don't want to stop you in the middle of a fight to have an argument. I want to help you! You're the one who's arguing!"

"What? I don't want to argue with you either!"

"Well, then why don't we stop arguing, Mario?"

"Because this is important! We need to have this argument–I mean–this *discussion!"*

"Couldn't this…*discussion* wait until later, when we're not in mortal peril?"

"That's exactly why we need to hash this out! Because we're in mortal peril, *right now!"*

Although they didn't slow their pace for a moment during this argument/discussion, there was no hope of reaching the other side of the bridge before Big Bertha launched her next attack. This time, Big Bertha spiraled in midair to shake off Mrs. Sushie, who was clinging to her mohawk-shaped dorsal fin.

"Cheep, cheep!" wailed Mrs. Sushie, in despair.

"CHEEP CHEEP!" roared Big Bertha, in fury.

Mario and Peach managed to avoid being swallowed whole by hopping a few feet to either side. Big Bertha ripped through the rope between them with such force, she snapped it in two and carried both Mario and Peach along with her, dangling by the torn remains of the rope bridge on either side.

…

Fortunately for Princess Daisy, when she felt half of the bridge start to give out beneath her, Daisy caught herself, and had the sense to use her yellow sash as a makeshift baby carrier for Gonzales Jr.

Up ahead, Daisy saw that Koops and Koopie Koo had made it safely to the solid support platform that marked the halfway point across the moat.

Glancing behind her, Daisy saw the monstrous Big Bertha tear through the final support rope, carrying her friends along for the ride.

With no supports left, the rope bridge began to collapse. Luckily, thanks to the laws of Newtonian physics, Daisy had a fraction of a second to act before the law of gravity took effect. If you've ever watched a slow motion video of a bridge demolition, you might have a sense of how slow time felt to Daisy as she wrapped one her arm around the rope, the other around the snoozing baby Yoshi, and braced herself to ride the wave. As the bridge gave out beneath her, she sailed through the air majestically, Tarzan-style. Less majestically, she crashed against the cliff face of the rocky platform, George-of-the-Jungle-style. Nevertheless, Daisy managed to twist in midair to let her back absorb the impact, shielding Gonzales Jr. "Yow! Ow, ow, ow! …Man, having a baby is a lot of work!"

Daisy's eyes popped open in horror as she spotted Mario and Peach, both free falling as Big Bertha twisted in mid air to shake them loose from the rope. "Mario! Peach!"

They were several hundred feet above the waters below. Only a Cheep-Cheep could withstand such a fall.

Then, Daisy saw something shining behind the fortress walls of Toad Town, and a tornado of red bricks began to shape themselves into a floating road, like a scroll being unrolled across the sky.

…

Just as Mario and Peach reached the crest of their flight, the road flew into place ahead and beneath them, just in time!

Even so, their landing was rough. Big Bertha clipped against the far edge of the road, ripping off a small segment in the shape of her massive stomach. The monstrous fish bellowed with pain as she twisted and tumbled back down to the waters, the remains of the rope bridge spiraling wildly across her body. Mario and Peach came rolling to a stop along the flying road, catching themselves before they could topple off the other side.

Peach winced as she picked herself back up. "Ooh, I'm definitely going to feel that in the morning!"

Mario did a double take as he realized he was still alive. "Another road? Who could have–"

They glimpsed a flash of a blue Koopa shell, as Kooper flew over the fortress walls, Toadette gracefully riding on his back. Although she was clearly terrified, Toadette managed to keep a firm hold on Goombella and Goombario. All three clenched their teeth as the wind made their cheeks wobble wildly. Toadette skipped lightly off of Kooper's back, and the adventurous Koopa

flashed a winning grin as he emerged from his shell. “Success! Mario, let’s get the others back to safe–”

Behind them, Big Bertha smashed through the newly created path, one fin pinned against her side as she struggled to break free of the ropes that restrained her. “CHEEP CHEEP!” [Translation: “Death to the interlopers!”]

…

Daisy heaved a sigh of relief, then tightened her grip on the rope. “They made it! Now, I just gotta do a little rope climbing! Good thing I aced P.E. at Princess Academy!”

But as Daisy twisted around to secure her feet against the cliff wall, she felt her makeshift baby carrier go slack, and instinctively gripped Gonzales Jr. tightly against her breast. “Oh no! I suck at taking care of babies! Why, oh why, didn’t I pay more attention during Home Ec. at Princess Academy?!?”

“I gotcha’ covered, Princess Daisy!” roared Koops, as he took hold of the rope, and began to lift them up steadily.

Koopie-Koo resisted the urge to swoon as she watched Koops’ biceps ripple from the exertion.

Koops grunted. “This…is why…I started…lifting…weights!”

…

Thanks to the damage left by Big Bertha, retreating back to safety along the new path created by the rescue team was now impossible.

Goombario scowled as he wriggled free of Toadette’s tight grip. “Plan A is out! Plan B is to get everyone onto the new path, then it’s a cake walk forward to the finish line.”

Mario gave Goombario a thumbs up. “Great work! You all escort Peach and Daisy to safety. I’m going after Luigi and Bowser.”

Peach rarely lost her temper. But whenever she got heated, her “regal queen voice” betrayed her hidden rage. “Oh, no you don’t, Mario! Bowser is my responsibility. I *forbid* you from going after him alone!”

“See, this is *exactly* why I said we needed to have this argument earlier! You’re the Princess of the Mushroom Kingdom, Peach. You can’t afford to risk your life!”

“I most certainly *am* the Crown Princess of the Mushroom Kingdom, which means my life is in service to my subjects! Bowser is a threat to my people!”

Goombario was completely lost. “Um, Mario? Princess?”

Peach held up a finger. “Mr. Goombario, I apologize, but Mario and I need to finish our discussion.”

Goombario nodded his head. “Oh, you got it, um…”

An instant before Big Bertha could barrel through the brick pathway and send them all hurtling to their deaths, Mrs. Sushie slammed into the monster’s side to knock her off course. The two furious flying fish continued their argument in the Cheep-Cheep language until they splashed back down into the raging river.

Goombella decided a little tact was in order. “Goombario, I think Mario and Peach could use a little privacy. Why don’t we run for our lives back there for a bit, so they can have a few moments of peace and quiet while they run for their lives up ahead?”

Goombario nodded as he and Goombella slowed their pace slightly to let Mario and Peach pull ahead. “Great idea, Goombella. You know, you’re surprisingly considerate.”

“Whaddaya’ mean I’m *surprisingly* considerate? What’s so freakin’ surprising about me being considerate?”

“I just meant, ya’ know, based on my first impression of you, I didn’t take you to be such a socially gracious person. But now–”

“Not socially gracious? Based on what? You were the one who called me ‘Mario’s other Goomba’ when we first met! You think I didn’t hear that little gem?”

“That wasn’t directed at you! I was annoyed at Mario because–”

“By what possible logic could that comment *not* be directed at me?”

As the argument between Mario and Peach, and between Goombario and Goombella built to a crescendo, Kooper and Toadette glimpsed over their shoulders to see Mrs. Sushie and Big Bertha tearing out another chunk of the brick road behind them as they continued their furious mid-air battle.

Kooper glanced at Toadette. “Toadette, I think Goombario and Goombella could use a little privacy. Why don’t we run for our lives back there for a bit, so they can have a few moments of peace and quiet while they run for their lives up ahead?”

Toadette smiled sweetly. “Great idea, Kooper!”

After they casually backed up a few feet, they resumed running for their lives at a brisk, steady pace. Kooper whistled casually. “So, how’s your week going?”

Toadette shrugged. “Oh, you know, typical Monday.”

…

Goombario snarled as the argument circled back to the disastrous occasion when Mario had first introduced him to Goombella. “Look, that was ages ago! I barely even remember what I said!”

Goombella shook her blond ponytail with a flick. “Well, you may not remember it, but I most certainly do, and it was hurtful!”

Goombario glowered at Goombaria, snapping back hotly, but without sarcasm. “Well, then I’m sorry for hurting your feelings!”

Goombaria flashed her teeth as she answered with equal furious sincerity. “I accept your apology!”

“Thank you! Now, while we’re on the subject of hurt feelings, maybe you should learn to accept a compliment, rather than jump down my throat!”

Goombella pressed her face close to Goombario as she shouted in his ear. “You’re absolutely right! I have a tendency to get hot under the collar and talk over people. It’s a weakness in my character, and I should have been more considerate of your own feelings! I apologize!”

Goombario pressed even closer to Goombella as he shouted right back. “Well, don’t worry! I forgive you!”

Mishearing, Goombella huffed, as if Goombario had just responded rudely, before realizing what he’d just said. “Fine! Be that way! In that case–wait, you’re forgiving me? Just like that?”

Goombario faltered as he struggled to remember why they had been arguing in the first place. “Well, yeah. You forgave me, after all. Then I guess…we’re cool now?”

“Yeah, we’re totally cool! What we’re we talking about, before we–”

Behind them, Big Bertha bodily tackled Mrs. Sushie through the brick pathway, before Mrs. Sushie shot a bullet of water into the monstrous fish’s eye and dove back into the river to prepare her next attack. Toadette and Kooper lightly stepped around the crumbling debris, chatting amiably as a chunk of the road collapsed behind them.

“Aaargh! Run for your life!” wailed Goombario and Goombella, to each other.

…

Mario was painfully silent. Peach took a deep breath to calm her nerves. “I am Princess Toadstool, rightful heir to the throne of the Mushroom Kingdom. I will not be bossed around, *Sir* Mario.”

“Look, Peach–”

Princess Peach put on her brattiest “polite princess” face. “‘Princess Toadstool,’ would be the proper way to address me, under rules of courtly etiquette.”

“Well, lucky we’re not stuck in the royal court, *Peach*. And I’m not your servant. I’m not even a knight in your army. I’m just a kid from Brooklyn.”

“Then why do you fight as a champion of the Mushroom Kingdom, Mario? I don’t understand it. My father has offered you lands and titles as rewards for your efforts, and you turn him down, time and time again. *Why* do you fight for us?”

“Because when I first fell into your world through the warp pipe, I promised your father that I’d get *you* back home, safe and sound. I didn’t vow to serve and protect the Mushroom Kingdom. I didn’t even vow to serve and protect the *Princess* of the Mushroom Kingdom. I promised him that I would protect his *daughter*, until she became the rightful Queen of the Mushroom Kingdom. And I’m a man of my word.”

“That was years ago! You’ve fulfilled that promise, time and time again!”

“Not yet, I haven’t. I’m getting you home safe, and that’s that.”

“I’m *never* safe, Mario! Perfect safety is not a luxury that a Princess of the Mushroom Kingdom ever gets to enjoy! Bowser’s always preparing his next attack, and any time we beat him back, some other would-be tyrant pops up to take his place.”

“Which is exactly why your people need *you*, Princess. So when I tell you to leave me behind, and save yourself, you don’t have the luxury of throwing your life away, just to try and save mine.”

“I wasn’t trying to throw my life away! I was trying to help you, and you *needed* my help, Mario! I…I care about you! You’re…my best friend…”

Peach winced as she said the word, “friend.” It was true, in a way, Mario was her best friend. But Daisy was also Peach’s best friend, in another way. She even thought of Luigi as a “best friend,” far more than an ordinary friend. But as said the word, “friend,” she remembered Bowser’s taunting words in the prison cell.

Mario missed the pain on Peach's face as he fought to catch his breath. He was genuinely touched to hear Peach call him her best friend. "And you're mine. But Luigi is my brother. I'm responsible for him, just like you're responsible for your subjects."

Peach took another calming breath as she realized they had come to the crux of their disagreement. "So, your augment would be: it's not that you think I'm incapable, or would just get in your way. But, as a Princess, I have a higher moral obligation to preserve my own life, for the sake of my people?"

"Yes! Exactly!"

Peach beamed, happy to discover that Mario didn't think poorly of her. "That is truly a noble sentiment, Mario. But a Princess also has an obligation to lay down her life, if necessary, to protect her people. I'm perfectly aware of the risk I'm taking. But I would rather die fighting to stop the King of the Koopas from threatening my people, than live knowing I could have done something to stop him, and failed to do so. As soon as we catch up to Daisy and the others, I plan to rejoin them, and capture Bowser. I can only implore you to help me."

Mario ripped his hat off his head and shook it. "You are as stubborn as an…ah…as a mule, Princess!"

"Thank you. It's part of the job description."

Mario snorted as he slammed his hat back down on his own head. "Then we're at an impasse. You don't take orders from me, and I don't take orders from you."

"Are we? I think you made an excellent point, Mario. You have far more experience fighting than I do. When we come to Luigi's aid, I'm willing to grant you full tactical command of the mission to intercept Bowser, if you choose to accept it."

"Full tactical command, huh? So, hypothetically speaking, if the tactical commander gave a princess an order to flee and save herself, while the tactical commander stayed behind to hold off the enemy, what should a princess do in that situation?"

Peach stiffened as she felt the prongs of her own argument coming back to bite her. "In that *hypothetical* situation, *I* would obey *you*, Mario, without question, and without hesitation, on one condition…"

"Name it."

"That you won't throw your life away, either."

"I can't promise you that I won't die, Princess. I have to do what it takes to stop Bowser."

“No, not that. I know you’re prepared to lay down your life, but this is different. You asked me not to throw my life away, just to save yours. Please, Mario, don’t throw your life away, just to save mine.”

Mario considered his answer carefully. “My plan is to get everyone home, safe and sound. I won’t throw my life away for nothing.”

“Promise?”

“You have my word, Princess.”

Peach beamed. “See? You were right all along! I’m so glad we had this discussion!”

But in the river below, Big Bertha was lurking, readying to pounce. Mrs. Sushie blew bubbles in a final, futile effort to sue for peace, before Big Bertha propelled herself into the sky. This time, she aimed at a low, forward angle, so that she could catch up with her fleeing prey.

The moment that Mario and Peach settled their gentle disagreement, the gigantic Cheep-Cheep whizzed past them, her one free fin just grazing across Peach’s cheek, before Big Bertha crashed skidding into the path ahead of them, sending chunks of brick flying.

They were cut off from the path to safety!

Big Bertha rounded on them, the rope tangling more tightly around her with every frantic motion. “CHEEP CHEEP!”

Mrs. Sushie flew up to join Mario and Peach shaking her head. “It’s no use! She either doesn’t understand what I’m saying, or she doesn’t care!”

Daisy’s voice echoed from across the short distance between the two paths. “Peach! Over here!”

Fortunately, Toadette and Kooper had nailed their design for the emergency pathway. Everyone could manage the leap across the chasm to the platform. As Big Bertha continued to smash and destroy the emergency pathway in a blind rage, Mario and friends wasted no time darting across the second wooden bridge, the flag directly ahead of them. Behind them, the broken remains of the bridge began to shiver and float into the sky. Bertha had smashed it the old fashioned way, but now the Mario Maker was recycling the parts to assemble the next level.

Daisy groaned. “I thought we bought some time earlier with all that Koopa Surfin’ and Lakitu Lighting Speed business!”

Spike the Lakitu arose from below, finally pulling himself free from the kissy-faced fish. “Pwah! Heard my name mentioned? What’d I miss?”

Mario pointed a finger toward Big Bertha and barked. “Spike! Mrs. Sushie is fighting that monster all alone! Go back her up!”

Spike saluted as he zoomed to the rescue. “Aye, aye, sir!”

Mario gestured to the three Koopas in turn. “Koops, Koopie-Koo, Kooper, we’ve got a straight shot. Can you pull off another power shell?”

Kooper flashed two big thumbs-up. “Can do!”

“Oh, no, not again!” whined Peach, her stomach already churning at the thought.

“That’s an order, Princess!”

Peach scrunched up her face as she saluted, then dove into Mario’s arms. “Aye, aye, siiirrrr–”

Her last word trailed away as Mario leapt up onto Kooper’s shell to surf across the bridge. Peach clung to him tightly, praying she wouldn’t barf on Mario’s shoulder.

Meanwhile, Spike soared down to meet Mrs. Sushie, readying another red Spiny to throw at the monstrous Big Bertha. “Fear not, Mrs. Sushie!”

Mrs. Sushie held up both her fins. “No! Please, don’t hurt her! She’s confused! She thinks Mario and the others are trying to hurt her friends!”

Spike fumbled the red Spiny, then sheepishly hid it inside his flying cloud storage system. “Well, could you ask her to stop trying to hurt *our* friends?”

“I’m trying, but she–”

Calling like a mother bird for her chicks, Big Bertha flailed wildly to free herself of the tangled web of rope that bound her. Her tail fin caught Mrs. Sushie across the back, knocking her unconscious and sending her spinning off the floating road. Spike panicked as he saw Mrs. Sushie’s body go limp, and dove to rescue his old friend.

Gasping for air, Big Bertha launched herself blindly toward her enemies. But in her pain and confusion, her aim was wildly off. Just as Mario arrived safely at the base of the stone steps that led to the goalpost. Big Bertha smashed face-first into the cliffside behind them. Her whale-like song echoed piteously across the waters. Looking up at the little red enemy, Big Bertha gurgled. “CHEEP…CHEEP!” [Translation: “Don’t hurt…my children!”]

While all Cheep-Cheep possess a remarkable ability to survive outside of water, only the purple Cheep-Cheep of Jade Jungle are truly amphibious. Mrs. Sushie could breathe air indefinitely, as long as she returned to water before drying out, but Big Bertha only had gills. As the monstrous fish laid her head back, she felt her gills dry out, and her head swam. This was the end. She had failed to protect her school.

Then, Big Bertha felt the rope around her neck go slack and fall away. She felt the hands of several little enemies pressing against her. “Cheep…cheep?”

“This one’s too small. Gotta let her go back to the pond! C’mon, everyone! Push!”

As the last of the ropes went slack, Big Bertha twisted, and saw the little red enemy and the little pink enemy pushing her toward the river. She heard them chant a word she did not understand. “Together!”

Big Bertha saw the sky spinning around her, then felt the water as she splashed back into the river. Big Bertha did not know what the word “water” meant. But she knew she knew she was home, and that the enemies had saved her.

…

Spike caught Mrs. Sushie and pulled out of his swan dive, sending a ripple across the surface of the deadly waters in a rush of wind. “Wooo, yeah!”

As droplets of water sprinkled her face, Mrs. Sushie awoke. “Lakilester? You saved me, dearie!”

“You’re welcome, Ma’am…um, I prefer the name ‘Spike,’ ya know, especially when we’re adventuring.”

“But Lakilester is such a dignified name. You should wear it with pride!”

Spike spotted a massive pair of triangular sunglasses floating along the river. “Oh, sick! Dibs on the shades!”

Mrs. Sushie scowled ruefully. “Careful, I think those are Big Bertha’s.”

Spike smirked as he held the sunglasses up to his head. They were longer than the length of his entire body. “Finders keepers, losers weepers…”

“Must you insist on wearing sunglasses all the time, Spike, honey? You have such beautiful eyes, you know.”

Spike blushed, then tucked the massive sunglasses away into his seemingly infinite cloud storage system. “Hmm, a little big for me, but they’re just too cool to pass up. This will make a *fine* addition to my collection!”

[End of Chapter X]

Bowsette's Princess Lessons
Chapter XI: All the World's a Stage

Bowser felt the world spinning as he crawled on hands and knees toward the warp pipe. His heart thumping, Bowser clutched his chest, only to grasp one of the horrible, melon sized breasts he had been cursed with. No matter how many times he felt them, they always felt alien to him, like a limb that had fallen asleep. Dimly, he remembered a secret zone was hidden in the next castle, assuming Peach's game world was faithful to his original fortress design.

Bowser smiled shakily. Of course, Peach wouldn't think of removing his ingenious escape routes. After all, you can't improve on perfection!

There was a flash of motion, and Bowser shielded his face as a sea-green Parakoopa dive-bombed into the brick path before him, cutting off his path of escape.

Parakoopa dusted off his aviator hat. "Not another step! As a duly deputized officer of the Mushroom Kingdom Postal Service, I hereby place you under arrest!"

Bowser rolled his eyes. "Spare me the legalese! You're a good, hardy Parakoopa, aren't ya? And I'm the King of the Koopas! I don't get it, you should be following me! I could use a kid like you, with gusto!"

Parakarry whisked his mailbag off his shoulder with a flourish. Gripping the leather strap tight, he held it up to show Bowser the royal seal of House Toadstool that decorated the metal clasp. "You are no king of mine! I swore a sacred oath, to defend the mail of the Mushroom Kingdom against all enemies, foreign and domestic, and I refuse to abandon my post! Long live King Toadstool! And long live Crown Princess Toadstool, his rightful heir!"

"Nice purse."

The flaps of Parakarry's aviator hat seemed to stand on end as he spun his head to glance at the supposed "purse," before locking eyes on Bowser. "It's not a purse! It's a postman's satchel!"

Bowser sneered, his hands twitching as he prepared to claw through this final obstacle. "Well, purse or no purse, I admire any Koopa who's prepared to die, rather than back–"

Bowser squealed as he felt something yank on his tail, and turned to find Luigi. With a single thrust, Luigi threw Bowser. It was as if Luigi was David, slinging a stone at the giant Goliath, except that Bowser was simultaneously the sling, the stone, and Goliath all at once.

Bowser snarled as he slammed shell-first against the brick stone steps, the wind knocked out of him.

Luigi stood tall, looking more solid and intimidating than Bowser ever imagined possible. Though Luigi had lost the power of the fire flower, the power of the red mushroom still coursed through his veins. “Surrender, Bowser!

Bowser twitched as he lay on his stomach. This was all wrong! Over his many defeats over the years, Bowser had always *hated* how the cowardly Mario brothers would stoop to using power ups to give themselves the advantage. He’d never found much use for them. What need did King Koopa have for a petty red mushroom, when he already was the strongest in all the lands? And compared to his natural, fiery breath, a weasley fire flower seemed like a child’s toy.

As Bowser lay gasping on the ground, he felt his weak, fragile female body all over again. But now, for the first time, he truly knew his own weakness, as if his own flesh was a prison. The world seemed to glisten and blur, and as Bowser realized his eyes were filling with tears, he hissed and pressed his face against the cold brick floor to hide his shame. He had no strength!

In his despair, he cursed the thought of the red mushroom that had caused his downfall.

And as a picture of the mushroom appeared in his mind, it seemed to burn his eyes. Bowser blinked through the tears, and thought he saw a phantom image. For less than an instant, there was a beautiful woman, so like Peach, holding up the mushroom, both surrounded by flames. And then, she was gone. As Bowser’s vision cleared, he saw Luigi taking a cautious step toward him. “…Please, don’t make me hurt you.”

With a roar, Bowser sprinted at Luigi, winding up his fist, and his old strength seemed to awaken, burning through Bowser’s muscles.

As he saw the power of a red mushroom radiate through Bowser like an invisible flame, Luigi recognized the effects of a power up just in time to save his life. He threw up his arms to block as Bowser landed a devastating haymaker, the aftershock sending tremors through the very ground they were standing on. Ignoring the screaming pain in his arm, Luigi thrust forward and grappled Bowser. Remembering his past few years of intense judo training with Princess Daisy, and suddenly thankful that she’d been so insistent he take classes with her, Luigi twisted and attempted to redirect Bowser with a knee wheel technique, the *hiza-guruma*.

Luigi performed the technique flawlessly, but now that Bowser’s muscles had returned, so had his muscle memory, rekindling his wild fighting instincts. As Bowser felt the judo technique throw him off balance, he spun wildly to move with the flow, rather than against it.

If only Bowser had not regained his supernatural strength, Luigi would have won handily, then and there. But with a guttural howl, Bowser landed, and rather than collapse, strained his back to twist and toss Luigi towards the brick wall of the nearby fortress. Luigi curled into a ball to shield himself as he crashed through the wall, barely avoiding a lethal blow.

Parakarry dove towards Bowser's stomach, but Bowser crouched low and blocked to let his arms absorb most of the blow. Like an American football linebacker (or like a Chargin' Chuck for those of you who prefer Mushroom Kingdom sports), Bowser lifted Parakarry up and over his shoulder to clear his path.

Parakarry was able to stop his momentum just in time to avoid crashing into the stone steps, but as he twisted in midair, he saw Bowser diving head first toward the warp pipe, bellowing in triumph. "Yeah! Touchdown!"

With a resounding "Thwoomf!" Bowser stuck tight in the warp pipe, again, thanks to his wide, curvy, feminine buttocks. Bowser's muffled wails of protest were still audible from within the pipe. "Raaargh! Not *this* again!"

Parakarry shot like a bullet to strike the only available target: Bowser's ass. Bowser kicked his long, graceful legs wildly, then planted his feet in a futile effort to pull himself out of the pipe. But all he managed to accomplish was to send the torn remains of his black skirt flying as he thrust his heart-covered-boxer-clad ass high into the air, "Yow! Cut it out!"

Emerging from the debris, Luigi spotted Bowser and leapt to action, leaving crumbs of brick flying as he sprinted forward, grabbed Bowser's tail, and tugged.

Just before Bowser could pull himself loose, the warp pipe activated and began to suck him further in, his buttocks squeaking against the hot metal squeezing in on him from all sides. With a sharp "pop!" Bowser was sucked down the pipe, dragging Luigi along with him. Taken by surprise, Luigi's face struck nose-first against the sharp edge of the pipe, knocking him loopy. As Luigi felt the magic of the red mushroom die, his fingers seemed to weaken.

He remembered lying on his back, after he had failed to resist all 100 of the 100 fundamental techniques of judo in a row. Princess Daisy was standing over him, sweating profusely, and holding out a hand to help him up. "You almost had it that time, Weege! Keep trying! I know you'll get it!"

Without the power of the red mushroom, with nothing but his own ordinary strength, Luigi clung to Bowser's tail for dear life, as they were both dragged into the dark catacombs below.

…

The castle fortress of World 2-4 shivered, then disintegrated into a twister of blocks and flame. As the entire group sprinted along the brick path, ducking and dodging to avoid flying debris, Peach raised her voice above the din. "Bowser must have reached World 4-2! That means he's almost at the second warp zone."

Daisy grit her teeth as she clutched the baby Yoshi tightly in her embrace, and began to build up to a sprint. "All y'all better kick those legs up! We've still got an entire world of ground to cover!"

Then Daisy cupped one hand to her mouth to bellow across the expanse of empty sky that separated them from World 4. “You hear that, Luigi? We’re all counting on you!”

Goombario hopped in place as he pointed wildly with his invisible hands. “Watt!”

Goombella huffed as she struggled to keep up. She was more of a scholar than a jock. “What? Where’s Watt?”

“There’s Watt!”

A sweet, girlish voice squealed with delight above their heads. “Weeeee!”

Mrs. Sushie held her fins to her face. “Watt, honey! Be careful!”

A piece of elevator wire, dragging two massive red steel beams behind it, tore clean through a stone tower, before spiraling like a bolo toward the baby Sparky. The steel beams spiraled and slammed into the infant on either side, before crumbling and falling away, reduced to two heaps of twisting, molten metal. Unfazed, Watt pulled out her Saf-T-Pop® lollipop. “Will do, Mrs. Sushie! I’m doing just like Princess Peach told me! Safety first!”

Mario waved his hat to get Watt’s attention. “Watt! Keep an eye out for Vivian and Lady Bow in World 3-4! You need to warn them that the course is falling apart!”

“Yes, sir, Mister Mario, sir!”

A Podoboo, one of a species of sentient lava bubbles distantly related to the Sparkies, smashed against Watt in mid-air, then screamed like Private Willhelm as the tornado carried him away into the distance. In her surprise, Watt dropped her lollipop. “Hey! Watch where you’re going, *Pedoboo!* I’m an unsupervised child!”

Mario sighed as he watched Watt fly away into nothingness. “...I must be the world’s worst babysitter.”

Fixing his hat back on his head, he fell back to join the three Koopas bringing up the rear, then called loud enough for the entire throng to hear. “Keep a weather eye open for Ms. Mowz and Madame Flurrie in world 3-1! Peach, Spike, Toadette, the four of us need to help Kooper, Koops, and Koopie-Koo get past the vertical obstacles. There’s another shortcut hidden ahead. When we reach it, we can Koopa surf to skip the next level!”

Kooper snapped his fingers and gave Mario the thumbs up. “Great plan! You help us Koopas handle the vertical obstacles…”

A pillar of stone slammed into the brick path, 100 yards ahead of Peach and Daisy. Koops started to stammer, before Koopie-Koo slapped him encouragingly across the back of his shell. Koops found his tongue. “An-an-an-an…oop! And we’ll handle the horizontal ones!”

One after the other, Kooper, Koopie-Koo, and Koops ducked in their shells and glided toward the collapsed pillar. Ignoring the force of friction, the three Koopas tore through the remains of the tower, clearing the path for the rest of the group.

As pixelated words appeared across the blue sky, it turned an unnatural shade of midnight blue, before the magic of the Mario Maker’s virtual reality system began to block out the sun itself. “W-w-w-world 3-1 Loading-ding-ding-Load-Load-Loaded!”

…

Madame Flurrie carefully applied her magenta lipstick, before flipping her vanity mirror case shut with a snap. “Perfection! Ms. Mowz, let’s sneak in one more dress rehearsal, before our grand entrance.”

Ms. Mowz, femme fatale, masked master mouse-thief, and now unwilling vaudeville showgirl, sniffed. “Personally, I prefer improvisation.”

Madame Flurrie waved a wispy finger. “Ah, ah, ah! This is my first triumphant return to the stage of battle. I haven’t been this excited since my farewell tour. Did you know, I played Lady Macbeth in ‘The Scottish Play’?”

“The Scottish Play? What, you mean *MacBeth*?”

Madame Flurrie sucked in a breath, which doubled the wind spirit’s size. “Ms. Mowz! You simply mustn’t mention the name of the Scottish Play. Every thespian knows it’s bad luck!”

Ms. Mowz pouted. “...But, *you* just mentioned *MacBeth* by name, yourself!”

Madame Flurrie swooned at the second mention of William Shakespeare’s cursed play. “Ooo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hooooo! I most certainly did not! I only mentioned Lady MacBeth, the character! The name of the play itself is what carries the curse.”

“Chu! Pure superstition! In fact, I think I’ll try saying it five times, fast!

“Don’t you dare, Ms. Mowz. Why, I ought to put you across my knee and–”

“MacBeth, MacBeth, MacBeth, MacBeth, Mac–”

BATHOOM!

Ms. Mowz reeled on her red high heels as a tremor rumbled through the brick path below her. “Did you feel an earthquake?”

Madame Flurrie shivered, as she pulled out a pair of antique opera glasses to examine the horizon. “No, but I sense a shift in the winds. Please, Ms. Mowz, if only for my sake, let’s have no more discussion of The Scottish Play…By the Four Winds! I spy Mario and his lovely friends on the horizon! Places, Ms. Mowz, it’s nearly time for our cue!”

Ms. Mowz skittered to the lever on all fours. “Um, are you sure we didn’t break something with the whole business about saying ‘MacB’ out loud?”

The opera glasses disappeared in a puff of smoke as Madame Flurrie stuffed them into her plump, matronly bosom, and her voice became airy. “Perhaps we did, but the show must go on!”

Using the entire weight of her tiny body, Ms. Mowz jumped on the lever. With an echoing crack, stage lights flooded the brick platform with eerie light, and dry ice created the illusion of thick, billowing fog.

In the distance, Mario, Peach, Spike and Toadette hauled the three Koopas up the last of the stairs, before the Koopas withdrew into their shells, and rocketed through the group of Spinies blocking the wooden bridge ahead. Mario cupped his hands to his mouth and bellowed, “Ms. Mowz! Madame Flurrie! Where are–”

An explosion of light and smoke greeted them from the floating platform ahead. Emerging from the fog appeared Madame Flurrie, garbed in the horned helmet and armor of a valkyrie, and holding a spear. “Prepare for trouble!”

Ms. Mowz appeared, climbing the spear with ease, wearing a scarlet cape and top hat to match her customary mask. “Make it double!”

“To protect the world from–”

Daisy, who was not much of a theater-goer, bellowed to stop the show. “The entire world is falling apart!”

Pausing the performance, Madame Flurrie retrieved her opera glasses, and spotted the path beginning to collapse in the distance, then dropped them in her shock. “By the Bard’s of Stratford on Avon’s hairy mustache!”

Spike puffed as he waved at the blocks behind Madame Flurrie and Ms. Mowz. “Activate the–”

With a sharp intake of breath, Madame Flurrie puffed up her cheeks and flew like the wind, slamming her expansive belly against the brick that contained the hidden bean stalk that led to the shortcut in the clouds above. “Got it, Lakilester!”

As Daisy instinctively kissed Gonzales Jr. on the top of his forehead, the baby Yoshi's eyes fluttered open. "Hmm? Miss Daisy? I had the most wonderful dream. Everyone was trying to climb this magic beanstalk, but they weren't good climbers, so I had to fireman-carry a bunch of my friends up, all at once!"

Peach reached the vine first, and started to climb. "Everyone up! Follow me!"

Gonzales Jr.'s eyes popped open with delight. "Yes! My dream came true! Everybody who can't climb, get on my back!"

Before anyone could argue, Goznales Jr. ran under the feet of Goombella, Goombario, Koops, Koopie-Koo, and Kooper in quick succession. Once they were all piled in a precarious stack on his back, Gonzales Jr. immediately jumped at the vine and began to ascend toward the clouds, bellowing a war cry in a respectable imitation of the immortal Hulk Hogan: "Say your prayers, take your vitamins, and you will never go wrong!"

Toadette was next, calling over her shoulder as she scaled the vine. "Wait, who's getting the flag? We can't load the next level without hitting the trigger!"

Ms. Mowz moved before anyone could stop her, throwing away her hat and cape with a single gesture. "I'm on it!"

Mario noticed Ms. Mowz scampering ahead, and leapt off the platform in pursuit, rolling to break his fall. "Ms. Mowz!"

Peach spotted Mario, and with a thrill, understood what he was up to. Mario was going after the flag, alone, even if it meant he was left behind. "No! Don't do it Mario! Spike can snatch the flag!"

Spike clutched his skull as he looked back and forth from Princess Peach to Mario. "But, I can't help the Koopas perform the ultimate Koopa Surfin' technique, and grab the flag at the same time!"

Mario barked over his shoulder as he sprinted after Ms. Mowz. "No time to argue! Spike, Princess Peach, you do whatever it takes to catch up to Luigi and Bowser. That's an order!"

Remembering her promise to obey Mario if he told her to leave him behind, Peach stiffened. In her heart, she wanted to say no, go charging after Mario, and order him to save himself. But in her head, she knew exactly what needed to be done. The only way to save everyone…was to leave Mario behind. Blinking back tears, Peach pulled herself up and onto the cloud pathway. "You heard him! Just climb!"

Clutching to the vine just below Princess Peach, Gonzales Jr. roared. “Huh? And just leave him behind! We can’t abandon the Great Gonzales!”

Koop squeezed Gonzales’ Jr’s shoulder. “We won’t abandon him, Jr. But we have to trust him!”

Gonzales Jr. snarled as he finished scaling the vine, and dropped his five friends safely on the cloud path. “Dangit! Why is this responsibility stuff so complicated?”

Peach, Toadette, and Daisy quickly scooped up Goombella, Goombario, and Gonzales Jr. Steeling herself, Peach hopped lightly onto Kooper’s back, and for the first time in her life, began to Koopa Surf.

Having given his last pair of emergency-emergency sunglasses to Piff the Puff, Spike retrieved the massive pair of triangular sunglasses he had found in Big Bertha’s terrain. They extended several feet past either side of his head. “Same plan as before. Once we reach the end of the cloud shortcut, I’ll unleash my full power to fly us past the next level.”

Madame Flurrie fluttered up to join the group, her body billowing like a chemtrail behind her. “Flying, eh? Then you’ll need a fair, westerly wind, and I’m happy to oblige!”

Peach trembled as she maintained her delicate balance. “Here comes the end of the road! Goombas, Junior, we’ll all need both our hands, so hold on tight!”

Goombario and Goombella held up their invisible hands, looking eager. Both answered at once! “You got it!”

“Jinx!” added Goombella, before Goombario could jinx her.

Gonzales Jr. spun around Daisy’s neck and held onto the back of her tennis shirt.

After she felt Goombario cling tightly around her neck, Peach held out her hand to signal Spike. “Altogether, on three! One…Two…Three!”

Below them, they could just make out Ms. Mowz scaling the flagpole to snatch the flag. The entire world of the Mario Maker seemed to shudder awake. “World-orld-orld 3-2 Lo-lo-loading–kkcht–Loaded!”

Peach and Daisy each took one of Lakitu’s hands, then held Toadette between them with their free hands. They felt the wind rushing around them, and likely would have lost their hold on one another, had Miss Flurrie not arrived like a divine wind, gently carrying them all forward.

…

As Ms. Mowz bit through the rope that held the flag, she had a clear view of the ground collapsing in the distance. She was a master thief, who had dared to steal treasure from under the nose of a fire-breathing dragon, but she was still only a mouse. She knew that there was no way she could outrun death this time.

Then Mario appeared from behind the stone staircase, diving low and kicking off the base of the flagpole to catch her before she hit the ground.

Ms. Mowz squeaked as she landed safely in Mario's arms, looking for all the world like a sexy football. "Squee! …Nice catch, handsome."

"Ms. Mowz! Are you crazy?"

"Maybe I fancied having this pretty flag for myself! Or maybe I just wanted an excuse to take a little morning stroll, with just the two of us!"

Mario glanced behind him. The rate of the collapse was accelerating with each passing second. He was faster than Ms. Mowz, but even at top speed, he could only buy them a few extra seconds.

…

Peach felt her heart tighten in her chest. "They're not gonna' make it!"

Gonzales Jr. clenched his firsts so tightly, he nearly tore the fabric of Daisy's tennis outfit. "That's it, I'm tagging in!"

Something about the baby Yoshi's voice activated Daisy's maternal instincts. "Tagging in? Wait, what are you planning, young man?"

Gonzales Jr. launched himself off Daisy's shoulder, skydiving toward Mario and Ms. Mowz below. "Yooooooo-shiiiii!"

Focused entirely on running for his life, Mario took short, controlled breaths as he forced himself to sprint, ignoring the building exhaustion. He risked a glimpse over his shoulder, praying for an escape from the collapsing path approaching them from behind. He saw a baby Yoshi tumbling from the clouds above.

Mario remembered the day Gonzales Jr. had hatched from his egg, the same egg he and his friends had rescued from being cooked over-easy by an over-eager hot dog vendor.

Even as Gonzales Jr. landed, the ground gave way beneath him. But the baby's willpower was far stronger than the paltry laws of gravity. Kicking his legs wildly, Gonzales Jr. leapt back up onto the collapsing path, and sprinted at top-speed, easily overtaking Mario and Ms. Mowz, then

ducked under Mario's legs to lift both up onto his back. Before Mario knew it, he was seated on the baby Yoshi's back like a cowboy on a saddle. Gonzales Jr. pumped his fists and projected with his best announcer voice. "That's right, folks! It's the team-up you've been begging for! The Great Gonzales, the King of the Ring, the Glitz of the Pit, and his protege, the Great Gonzales, Jr., The Green Machine, The Diesel Dino, are together again, and back in action! And they're cruisin' to lay a bruisin' on that big-ass bozo Bowser!"

In the sky overhead, Madame Flurrie and Spike carried the rest of the party high above the enemies littering the obstacle course. As Peach saw Gonzales Jr. deftly leap over and past wave after wave of red Spinies, with Mario and Ms. Mowz safely in tow, she finally let herself breathe. "Spike, Madame Flurrie! Bring us in low. We'll need to snatch the flag at the end of world 3-2 ourselves."

Spike's eyes bulged behind his new sunglasses. "I can…go back…for Mario…after I drop you off!"

"Perfect. While Spike doubles back, the rest of us need to back up Luigi…he's our only hope."

Peach focused on the flag ahead. Mario had charged into the jaws of death, for all of them. But if Luigi failed to delay Bowser long enough for them to catch up, it was all for naught. They were all counting on Luigi, and Luigi was counting on them.

…

Howling, Bowser emerged from the pipe overhanging the dim underground chamber, Luigi hanging limply from his tail. The electronic words "World 4-2" floated in the air, then flickered and died as the two foes tumbled through it, and crashed into the brick floor below.

Emerging from a cloud of debris, Bowser groaned as he clapped the torn remains of his black skirt to shake off the dust. "Oh, man, why didn't old me think to put an elevator there?"

Ahead of him loomed a bottomless pit, with two narrow pillars of stone acting as the only crossing point. Across the chasm, a raised pathway of brick awaited him. A narrow crawl space had been carved out of the base of the brick wall, like a tunnel, which Bowser had designed as an access tunnel for humble Goombas and Koopa Troopas. Bowser smiled, remembering that his secret escape route was somewhere at the end of the path ahead. Bowser took a jaunty step forward, then nearly tripped as he felt something clinging to his tail.

Trembling, Luigi looked up at Bowser, but there was no fear in his eyes.
"Not…one…more…step…"

For a moment, something in Luigi's eyes reminded Bowser of Mario. "Luigi? What a joke! Put some muscle into it!"

Spinning wildly, Bowser shook Luigi off his tail. Luigi bounced once, like a dead cat, then spiraled across a bottomless pit, before he came rolling to a stop on the other side, just below the raised platform of brick.

Lifting up a dainty, bare foot, Bowser thrust his head back and laughed. “Gwar, har, har! Are you watching, Luigi? Look, I’m gonna’ take *one more step!* Try to stop–”

Parakarry shot out the warp pipe above, aiming directly at Bowser’s laughing face below. Bowser opened his eyes just as the Parakoopa smashed into his mouth, knocking him flat on his back with enough force to make a deep crater in the stone floor. The impression was a perfect silhouette of Bowser’s new hourglass figure. Hissing and spluttering, Bowser sat up and spat Parakarry out, along with a tooth, and felt the power of the red mushroom dying, leaving him as weak and fragile as a regular woman. “Grrawrrgh! Can’t you let a Koopa finish his train of thought? It’s like I can’t even finish a sentence without some do-gooder interrupting–”

Bombette and Admiral Bobbery tumbled out of the warp pipe below, their fuses already lit. The force of the double explosion engulfed Bowser, sending him rocketing back into the brick wall behind him. As his world began to go fuzzy and dark, Bowser collapsed face-down. Delirious, he thought he saw the words “Game Over!” swimming before his eyes, before the mental picture of a red mushroom once again burned in his mind’s eye. It was like smelling epsom salts. Bowser awoke, gagging, swinging his claws wildly.

Parakarry spun like a hawk and alighted on one of the stone platforms that hung over the bottomless pit. “Bowser! You have to stop!”

Still singed from her last self-implosion, Bombette stumbled to her feet, wincing. “You broke the Mario Maker! It’s falling apart!”

Admiral Bobbery rolled out of the steaming crater he had left in the solid brick wall. “We have to get out of here. Come quietly, and we won’t hurt you!”

Smoke billowed from Bowser’s mouth. “No, *I* have to get out here. I’m *not* coming quietly, and I *will* hurt you!”

Charging like a bull, Bowser leapt to the small platform and bodily tackled Parakarry, carrying them both across the black chasm. Parakarry managed to land a sharp jab against Bowser’s face before Bowser smashed the valiant mailman into the brick platform, shell-first. Bowser glimpsed a wide-eyed Luigi below him, before the green-clad Mario brother ducked into the low tunnel beneath the brick platform.

Bowser’s eyes glowed red as he clawed at Luigi’s boots. “Come out, come out, little pig!”

Luigi screamed as Bowser’s face pressed against the entrance of the crawl-space. “Here’s Bowsy!”

Luigi kicked wildly, the sole of his boot leaving a perfect shoe-print impression on Bowser's face. Bowser howled and released Luigi. Admiral Bobbery lit his fuse, and with an echoing, "Kaboom!" launched himself across the bottomless pit, aiming at Bowser's back.

As Bowser stood, he felt something slam against him from behind, sending him barrelling forward into the wall. Once again, Bowser felt something break deep within him, as the lethal blow extinguished his new-found strength. Once again, the red mushroom appeared in his mind's eye, so clearly, he was sure he could reach out and grasp it. His eyes rolling, Bowser snatched behind his back to seize Admiral Bobbery and slammed the old sailor up against the wall, next to the unconscious Parakarry. "Look at your little hero! Scurrying away, like a scared rabbit! Bet you twerps wish Mario was here, huh?"

His whole body tingling from the adrenaline rush of the power mushroom, Bowser spotted an explosion, and knowing that the pink Bob-bomb girl was attacking, instinctually caught her like a football before she could smash into his face. Then Bowser spun like a quarterback to toss her up into the brick ceiling.

Shutting her eyes tight, Bombette screamed in pain as she bounced off the ceiling, then again off the floor.

Spit flying, Bowser clawed his way to the top of the platform, seeking the hidden pathway to the hidden warp pipe. "Don't you get it? Koopas, Goombas, Bob-bombs! None of you can stop me! Your *entire race* are my slaves, and they love it!"

Along the path ahead, Bowser saw another red mushroom pop into view, right above a dark hold in the ground. Bowser paused. It suddenly occurred to him how strange his visions of power ups had been. Subconsciously, each vision had simply felt like getting a fresh burst of strength, a second wind. Bowser blinked, wondering if the cheerful red mushroom before him was another mirage. Then a gloved hand emerged from the hole, snatching the Mushroom.

Luigi climbed up and out of the hole, scarfing the red mushroom in a single bite. Though he was bruised and battered, Luigi stood tall as the mushroom's power strengthened him, and put up his dukes.

With a primal roar, Bowser charged, winding up a ferocious uppercut.

…

Luigi remembered the schoolyard playground of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral School, where little Mario and little Luigi received their education, in the heart of Little Italy. Little Mario had his fists up, thumbing his nose as he practiced shadow boxing. "Let's-a go, Luigi! Put up your dukes!"

Little Luigi held up his fists, shakily. "But, Mario, I don't wanna' fight you!"

Mario danced around Luigi, landing soft punches on Luigi's shoulders. "We're not fighting! We're sparring! You're Rocky Marciano, the Brooklyn Blockbuster! And I'm World Heavyweight Champion Jersey Joe Walcott! Don't worry, Rocky, you make a big comeback in round 13 to win the title!"

"Ow! Mario, cut it out!"

Mario paused the play boxing and sighed. "Luigi, I can't always be there to watch your back when your bully's on your case. If you want to learn how to handle a bully, the first trick is to learn how to handle yourself!"

"..But, hitting people is wrong!"

"Which is why *he* shouldn't be hitting *you*. Look, why do you think he only ever picks on kids half his size?"

"Because we're easy prey?"

"Because he *thinks you're* easy prey. I'm smaller than you, and he doesn't pick on me anymore, not since the first day of school."

"The first day of–that was the day you came home with two black eyes and a fat lip! You…you actually beat him?"

"Oh, no, he cleaned my clock. He probably got three good hits in on me, for every one good hit I got on him."

"...Then, how come he never bothers us, when you're with me?"

Mario put up his dukes. "Because he knows I can get at least one good hit on him."

Tremulously, Luigi put up his dukes. He was still frightened by the very idea of boxing, but he could never be frightened of Mario. Meekly, he threw a punch at Mario's shoulder, barely hard enough to ruffle the fabric of his sleeve. "It…still doesn't feel right. Aren't we supposed to turn the other cheek?"

Mario switched up his boxing stance, Sugar Ray Robinson style, and gave Luigi his softest possible two-hit combo, which was still considerably harder than Luigi's love tap. "Hmm…I don't think it's the same thing, Luigi. Every time cousin Wario makes fun of me, I don't hit him. I just tell myself to turn the other cheek. I even let him play the sheriff sometimes, when we play sheriffs n' rustlers. But standing up to a bully seems different."

Luigi stumbled backward to retreat from Mario's jabs, accidentally discovering a defensive stance as he held his arms up to block. "What's the difference? It's still hitting someone."

Just as Luigi attempted his first-ever counter punch, Mario paused to think at exactly the wrong moment, before Luigi's fist bounced off his nose. Mario howled as he pinched his nose with one hand. "Yow! Mama mia!"

Luigi squealed in horror. "Mario! I didn't mean it!"

When he saw his nose wasn't bleeding, Mario bounced back right back into his boxing stance as if nothing had happened, darting around Luigi to mix up his next offense. "I'm fine, Weegee. I was thinking and you caught me off guard, was all. Serves me right. Anyway, I think I know the difference."

Luigi bobbed and weaved to evade Mario's fists. He was grateful that Mario was okay, but he couldn't help but notice that Mario's punches were just a hair less playful now. "Yikes! …And that is?"

"Easy. If you stand up to a bully, even if he hurts you worse than you hurt him…maybe you're the one who teaches him to give up being a bully."

…

Luigi's fists shook as he settled into a perfect outside boxing stance. Easily ducking out of the way of Bowser's wild, telegraphed punch, Luigi quickly sidestepped and counter-punched.

Bowser seethed as he clutched his dainty nose, and felt blood. Luigi retreated a few steps to keep his distance, but didn't take his eyes off his opponent. "Not. One. More. Step. Bowser."

With the scent of blood clogging his nose, Bowser charged like a steamroller, trying to overwhelm Luigi with a relentless offense. This time, Bowser focused on controlling his punches, still trying to get the feel for his strange, 5-fingered fists.

But Luigi knew all he had to do was knock the wind out of Bowser once, and the power of the red mushroom would give him an unbreakable advantage. Like Muhammad Ali in his prime, Luigi rolled to evade, then surprised Bowser with a quick gut punch. It was a perfect "rope-a-dope."

Lurching forward, Bowser gagged, before Luigi followed up with a "one hitter quitter" to Bowser's face, knocking Bowser to the ground.

As he attempted to curl into a fetal position, Bowser felt his arms and legs twitching. He was too weak! As he gagged for air, Bowser felt like he was drowning. He heard voices from far away, calling to him from above, as if he was trapped beneath the waves of a great storm.

“You’ve lost, Bowser! Stay down!”

“You got him, Luigi!”

“Hold him down!”

Stars clouded Bowser’s vision, followed by darkness, like thick, billowing smoke. He had lost…to Luigi?

Two shining eyes, blue as ice, stared at him from the blackness, before they burned as red as fire. He heard a voice, his own voice, yet also someone else’s voice, in his throat. “Sooner or later…I’ll win.”

As Luigi pinned down Bowser’s unconscious slender body, for a brief moment, Luigi saw a woman again, and not his old enemy. Then Bowser’s eyes snapped open, and pink flames erupted from his hands, engulfing them both. Parakarry screamed as the rising flames singed his wings.

Bombette and Admiral Bobbery’s fuses caught on fire, and they dove back to avoid igniting next to their allies. “No! Get back–”

As Admiral Bobbery and Bombette exploded, Bowser’s pink flames rocketed him up and into the air, hugging Luigi tightly around the waist to carry him along. They ricocheted off a question mark block above, bounced off a second question mark block below, ripped through a magically floating red steel beam, and slammed into a final platform of brick.

Tumbling to the brick floor below, Luigi shrunk back to his normal, diminutive size, as the power of the red mushroom died.

But Bowser’s velocity carried him forward well past the platform, until he collided against the green steel of a Piranha Plant pipe.

His chest heaving, Bowser blinked his eyes, and saw a magical vine spring from the block platform behind them. Of course! That’s where he’d hidden the secret path of escape from the underground catacombs. As his mind cleared, Bowser remembered what he would find at the top of the growing beanstalk: a grove of toadstool trees, crowning the top of the fortress. And behind those trees, the final warp zone. And from there: freedom.

His old strength slowly returning, Bowser rested his weight against the green pipe, and lifted himself to his feet. “Sooner or later…I *always* win.”

[End of Chapter XI]

Bowsette's Princess Lessons
Chapter XII: Shadows, Spectres, and Steamed Hams Sequences

Spike the Lakitu carried Princess Peach in one hand, and Princess Daisy in the other. Peach was carrying Goombario on her back, and she and Daisy used their free hands to carry Toadette between them. Toadette was carrying Goombella on her back. Furthermore, Kooper was clinging to Princess Peach's legs, Koops was clinging to Princess Daisy's legs, and Koopie Koo was clinging to Toadette's legs. And thanks to that bastard Sir Issaac Newton for discovering the laws of gravity, that meant Spike was carrying everybody. Without the aid of Madame Flurrie's guiding wind, the poor Lakitu could never have managed it. Even so, his eyes bulged behind his magnificent new sunglasses. "Can't…hold…on…much…longer!"

Goombario bared his buck teeth. "Spike, if you drop us, Goombaria's gonna' tell everyone your name is really Jugemu Jugemu Pokopii Lakilester, AKA "Michael," AKA "Jonathan," AKA "Spike," the Lakitu at my funeral."

Spike grinned to hide the pain. "But…how will you tell her, if I drop you, Goombario?"

"I won't. I just know Goombaria and that's exactly the kind of stunt she'd pull. It's not a threat, Spike. I'm simply informing you of the most likely possibility, should you drop the ball."

"Spike…the Lakitu…does…*not*…drop…the ball…*nor* his friends!"

Madame Flurrie puffed up her cheeks, before blowing another gentle updraft. "Boys! Now is not the time for such frivolities. Besides, you aren't exactly the most aerodynamic craft I've ever piloted. This is much more tricky than trying to help Mario fly in paper airplane mode."

Kooper looked askance at Madame Flurrie. "Wait, Mario has a *paper airplane* mode? What is that?"

Koops raised a finger as he clung to Princess Daisy's legs for dear life. "Well, you know, Kuh-Kooper. It's–ah–a piece of paper folded into–"

Koopie Koo's ponytail wagged as she looked up at Koops, with a mix of love and irritation. "Honey, I'm sure Kooper knows what a paper airplane is. What we want to know is, how exactly can Mario turn into a paper airplane?"

"Oh–uh–yes…That makes more sense. It was kind of freaky actually, and a long story…Goombella could explain it better. Would you mind, Goombella? You know I'm not the–ah–best at telling long stories…"

Goombella immediately forgot her fear of heights as she heard the invitation to talk about one of her many niche nerdy interests at length. "Ah! During the quest to unseal the Thousand-Year Door, Mario and I encountered a dark, magical being locked in a black treasure chest, and

Mario sort of unlocked it and got, like, totally cursed. Our hypothesis is that the black chests contained the wandering souls of the Four Heroes of old, cursed by the Shadow Queen to remain forever trapped in a shadow world beyond our comprehension, until Mario freed them and allowed their souls to pass on to the afterlife. After we opened the first one, the spirit within laid a terrible, evil curse on Mario: to become a paper airplane."

Looking defeated, Kooper muttered under his breath. "...The *first* one?"

Daisy cooed. "Dang! You guys get into all sorts of fun trouble when I'm away. I can't believe Mario fell for the old bad guy trapped in a mundane object trick!"

Goombella groaned. "Four times…Four times Mario opened one of those cursed chests, right in front of me."

Kooper groaned. "But, Mario's not a paper airplane now? So what happened to the curse?"

Goombella shook her head. "Oh, Mario was never stuck as a paper airplane. He could just, like, turn into a paper airplane whenever he wanted."

Goombario nodded eagerly, and jumped in. "It was pretty dang useful, actually. Mario used the curses to help him collect the seven Crystal Stars, and unlock the Thousand-Year Door. After they stomped the Shadow Queen, Mario told me that the curses just, sorta…went away, not too long after that?"

Goombella looked at Goombario appraisingly, "Goombario? How did you know so much about the Thousand-Year Door expedition?"

"Oh, I read all the accounts about Mario's adventures."

Goombella's eyes twinkled like power stars. "You read my book?"

Goombario blinked. "...Oh, I guess it makes sense that you'd be the Goomba to write that one."

"Waittaminnit, so did *you* write the Tattle Log for the Star Rod Affair?"

Goombario blushed. "Oh, that old thing? …Yeah, that was me!"

"I love that book! I read that before I even met Mario!"

Toadette looked back and forth from Goombario to Goombella skeptically. "So, you both wrote an entire book about Mario…and then published it anonymously?"

Goombario nodded. "Yeah. For free."

Goombella flashed a buck-toothed smile. “On the internet!”

Princess Daisy, who had been daydreaming about the many possibilities that would unfold if she could turn into a paper airplane at will, snickered uncontrollably. “Hee hee! That’s so weird! I love it!”

Goombario shook his head. “Why does *everyone* think Tattle Logs are weird?”

Kooper snorted, his voice gently teasing. “Dude, I told you people would think it was kinda weird to write a whole book about Mario and post it on the internet.”

Still desperately clinging for her life, Koopie-Koo glanced up to address both the Goombas. “So…is this a Goomba thing?”

“Yes,” said both Goombario and Goombella at once, before flashing their eyes furiously at one another.

“Jinx!” roared both Goombas.

“Double jinx!” added Goombella, before Goombario could remember to double jinx her.

Fuming, Goomabario pressed his mouth tight shut, honoring the sacred rules of the playground game of jinx.

Daisy laughed so hard, she *almost* forgot to hold on for dear life. “Woah! You Goombas are wild! So, Goombella, how did Mario’s paper airplane mode work, mechanically? Does it…hurt to turn into a paper airplane?”

Goombella shrugged. “Not my field. For that, you’d have to ask a theoretical physicist. Toadette?”

Toadette, who just so happened to be earning her doctorate in theoretical physics while working as Peach’s loyal lady-in-waiting, cleared her throat. “While we haven’t been able to independently confirm Goombella’s hypothesis that the chests contained the lost souls of the Four Heroes, Professor E. Gadd’s spectral analysis on the black chests have confirmed that they exist on an alternative plane of reality. It’s likely the mysterious beings were granted the power to manipulate the geometric laws on our dimension…Imagine if you were to read a magic book with living, two-dimensional pictures. To the paper people in the book, you, as a three-dimensional person, would appear to possess uncanny magical powers.”

Daisy looked at Toadette in awe. “The more I hear you explain, the more confused, and interested, I get. Should I be taking notes? This seems like a whole bunch of critically important lore about the Mushroom Kingdom that I will need to know later.”

Forgetting that Goombella had jinxed him, Goombario shrugged. “Eh, Mario never seems to worry about the ancient lore of Mushroom Land more than he has to, and he gets along just fine.”

This fascinating discussion might have gone on forever, but for the past two minutes, Peach had been struggling to find a pause in the conversation to politely interject. Finally, she gave up, and raised her voice. “Enough! Mario is *not* fine, he is in immediate danger! We have to stay focused on capturing the flag.”

Daisy winced, remembering how, back at Princess Academy, she was usually the one who lost her temper, while Peach was usually the one who restored order and calm. “You’re absolutely right, Peach. I’m sorry for talking too much when I should be listening.”

Peach hung her head. “...No, I’m sorry, everyone, for yelling.”

Daisy grinned. “No biggie! Who am I to judge? After all, I yell all the time. All right, troops! You heard the Crown Princess! Cut the chit-chat and get your head in the game. Who’s grabbing that flag?”

Kooper scanned the horizon to spot the flag ahead. “It’s up to us Koopas. We’re the only ones who can spare a hand.”

Madame Flurrie exhaled another gust of wind, then gasped for breath. “Got it! Koopie-Koo, you’re in the middle, so I’m aiming you toward the flag. If a rogue wind catches us by surprise, it will be up to Kooper or Koops to catch the flag.”

Taking a calming breath, Princess Peach used her commanding voice, but this time, she was controlled. “So be it. Master Spike, I must beg you to hold on a little longer. We are all counting on you.”

Spike grit his teeth. “I…won’t…let ya’…down!”

As Madame Flurrie’s blustery breath carried them all forward, like a toy boat along a gentle river, they all swayed softly. It was exactly like catching a wave. The fluttering flag steadily drew closer. Koopie-Koo released her grip on one of Toadette’s legs to free her hand. “Almost…there!”

Then a rogue air current blasted toward them from the south, like an invisible wall. The entire formation began to spiral wildly, like a leaf.

Instinctively, they all gripped tightly to one another, as Madame Flurrie swept forward to shield them from the southerly gale and guide them back on course.

With an effort, Koops peered his eyes open, saw the flag filling his vision, and snatched at it. “Got it!”

Then, there was a buzzing sound, like static feedback, and he felt the fabric of the flag vanish from between his fingers. “No! I had it!”

The entire flagpole seemed to turn invisible, then reappeared, stuttering and flickering. In horror, Peach knew what this meant: the glitch was slowly corrupting the Mario Maker. Their entire world was falling apart. As Peach dared to look down, all she could see was a dizzying expanse of tiny forests and endless fields, interrupted only by a few patches of jagged rocks and bluffs. If they fell, there was no hope of survival.

A vein started popping on Spike the Lakitu’s forehead. “Can’t…hold…on…much…longer!”

…

Mario saw everything. “Junior! We’ve got to get to that flag!”

Gonzales Junior spat an enemy Spiny out of his mouth like a bullet, knocking out a whole line of Spinies blocking their path, then roared with triumph. “I’m on it, brother!”

As Mario held Ms. Mowz tight against his chest with a single manly arm, she squealed girlishly, with a mix of sheer terror and delight. “Squeak! Mario, you’ll have to toss me at the flag! It’ll buy us a few seconds!”

“If I miss, it could kill you!”

“If you miss, it *will* kill me. But you never miss when it counts, handsome.”

Gritting his teeth, Mario saw the rest of their friends dangling in the sky, and knew Ms. Mowz was right: it was the only way. Deftly adjusting his grip on Ms. Mowz, Mario held her aloft like a quarterback preparing to toss a football. “Let’s-a go!”

Rather pleased with herself, Ms. Mowz held out her tiny paws, like Superman in flight. “Let’s-a go!”

As the Mario Maker glitched again, it started playing *The William Tell Overture*, which fortuitously was the perfect soundtrack as Gonzales Junior ploughed through wave after wave of enemies at a mad gallop. “Let’s-a goooooo!”

As the music reached a crescendo, Mario aimed and tossed the masked mouse up and over the stone staircase, toward the flag. As Ms. Mowz flew toward it, she noticed it glitching in and out of existence. She reached for it, only for it to disappear, then spun her body in midair, whipping her long tail to the spot where the flag had been an instant before. The flag reappeared, and as

her tail caught on it, Ms. Mowz was able to twist and grasp the pointed tip of the flag, by a whisker. As she tore it free from the pole with an elegant flourish, Ms. Mowz saw the end of the road beneath her, followed by nothingness. “Squeeeeee!”

Mario and Gonzales Jr. appeared from behind the stone staircase. Diving down toward the base of the flagpole, Gonzales Jr. kicked off it, and dove forward after Ms. Mowz, straight into the nothingness.

The robotic voice of the Mario Maker stuttered into life. “World 3-3…
Loading-Loading-Loading-Loading-Loading…”

A few isolated bricks began to fly shakily into place below them. Ahead of them, the pathway started to solidify, like a patchwork quilt. As Mario caught Ms. Mowz in his arms, Gonzales Junior kicked his feet wildly to defy the laws of gravity. The baby yoshi groaned with exhaustion, as his little heart thumped in his chest. “...Gonzales! You can make it! Jump off my back, and–”

Before Gonzales Junior could finish, Mario scooped the baby Yoshi up with his other hand and tossed both of his friends to the safety of the path ahead. Mario saw the deathly drop below, and reached his hands forward, praying to find purchase. His fingers caught the edge of a brick just as it glitched back into existence. Feeling it trembling, Mario scrambled up and onto the path that was knitting together and falling apart all at once beneath them. Scooping up both his friends, Mario carried them each over one shoulder. “No one gets left behind!”

There were a few tense seconds as Mario navigated the precarious path, before the echoing voice of the Mario Maker finally finished. “Loading-Loading-Loading…Loaded!”

With a ripple, the brick path solidified before them, and a grove of Toadstool Trees began to materialize in mid air. Ms. Mowz sighed, contentedly. “So, Mario, I can’t help but notice you don’t have a ring on your finger. Whenever are you going to settle down with a nice girl?”

Gonzales Junior retched. “Ugh! Gag me with a spoon! The only kissing I wanna see is Bowser kissing the ground after we lay down a beat down on his sorry butt!”

Ms. Mowz sniffed. “Junior! It’s impolite to refer to a lady’s derriere in such a crass fashion.”

“But Bowser’s not a lady! He’s a dude, and a jerk! He only looks like that because of that stupid crown!”

Ms. Mowz rubbed her paws together. “Hmm…wonder if I could swipe it off his or her head while he or she isn’t looking?”

…

Madame Flurrie dove underneath the flying formation to create an updraft.

Peach called down, her mind going dizzy at the sheer drop below. “Madame Flurrie, can you get us back to the platform?”

Madame Flurrie could only shake her head as she puffed her cheeks and blew to create another updraft.

Daisy gnashed her teeth. “We’re losing height too quickly! We’d never make it!”

Spike’s giant sunglasses went flying off his head and into nothingness.
“Only…way…out…is…through!”

Just as Jugemu Jugemu Pokopii Lakileter, AKA “Michael,” AKA “Jonathan,” AKA “Spike” the Lakitu’s arms gave out, a toadstool tree materialized below them, and the entire company came crashing and spiraling to a halt.

Princess Peach picked herself back up, and started counting noses. “...Daisy, Toadette…Goombario, Goombella…Kooper, Koops, Koopie-Koo. That’s everyone!”

As Peach stood up and dusted herself off, every inch a Princess, they saw the next goal post flag fluttering behind her, and a towering fortress, which seemed to fade in and out of existence, like the face of a giant spectre. “Madame Flurrie, Mister Spike, thank you. We owe you our lives. Spike, can you go on?”

Spike held up a shaky arm for a thumbs up. “Just…catching…my breath, your highness!”

“As soon as you are able, double back and help Mario. Everyone else, we’re going after Bowser.”

Daisy slammed her fist into her open palm. “...Hold out just a little bit longer, Luigi.”

…

Bowser’s eyes widened with glee as he rode the magic vine higher and higher toward the clouds, its explosive growth carrying him along faster as he climbed. As he reached the hidden grove of red Toadstool trees atop the brick tower, a few puffy cumulus clouds parted like a curtain to reveal the hidden warp zone. “One quick hop down a warp pipe, and I’m home free. All too easy!”

As a shadow passed over his head, Bowser felt the hairs on the back of his graceful, feminine neck stand on end, and dived for cover. A sea-green shape dove like a peregrine falcon, cutting through the air where Bowser’s head had been a moment before.

After missing his surprise attack, Parakarry came in for a rough landing, skipping like a smooth stone across the top of a couple red Toadstool Trees, before crashing into the stone steps that

led to the hidden zone. As Parakarry stood, one of his wings was visibly bent at an awkward angle. “Halt!”

“Look, kid, you get an A+ for effort, but you gotta’ learn to just take the L.”

Bowser stiffened as Luigi appeared over the ledge behind him. As Luigi landed, he pointed a defiant finger, his face set. Luigi would have cut an intimidating figure, but for the fact that he appeared to have grown two massive, perfectly spherical breasts. “Bowser! You’re coming with me!”

Bowser spat. “Pffft! Nice rack, Luigi!”

As Bowser rolled back his head and laughed, his own melon-sized boobies jiggled freely.

Looking abashed, Luigi stuffed his white-gloved hand down his shirt, pulled out the unconscious bodies of Bombette and Admiral Bobbery, and set them down gently, as if they were two sleeping babies. “Bowser, as a knighted champion of the Mushroom Kingdom, I order you to surrender to the mercy of Princess Peach!”

“Peachy gave *you* a knighthood, Lou-wussy? Aw, did you get a *participation trophy* too? Just give up, string bean, you know you’re no match.”

Luigi’s mustache curled as he pulled a red mushroom from his pocket, and scarfed it. With a poof, Luigi grew in height to stand at eye level with Bowser, his muscles swelling. “I’m taking you in.”

Bowser sneered, making a show of flexing his own toned biceps. “Had a red mushroom squirrelled away? Congrats. Now it will take me *two* whole punches to knock you out, instead of just one.”

With a snarl, Bowser charged, aiming a tiger-claw strike for Luigi’s face.

…

After Spike the Lakitu doubled back to aide Mario, Peach and Daisy led the charge to the next goalpost. Daisy snatched the flag, and the Mario Maker’s voice crackled to life, nearly unintelligible behind buzzing static. “Worl*kkffvvmm*3-4*bvvhhrmm*ding-loaded-ded-ded!”

With a flurry of static, the stone fortress seemed to click into existence with a dense snap.*

[*Author’s note: If you’re wondering, yes, I *am* going to use the Nintendo Switch sound effect here, if I ever get around to making the audiobook.]

Daisy waved for the rest of the group to follow her as she charged toward the fortress gates, then called to Peach as she ran. “Why is this one fully loaded? The last two fortresses all fell apart!”

Peach grinned. “That’s a good sign! It means Bowser hasn’t reached the next Warp Zone yet. It’s taking some strain off the Mario Maker’s CPU!”

By now, everyone was gasping for air from their long exertion. As the towering gate of the fortress loomed ahead of them, like a monstrous open maw, they knew they were all thinking the same thing. If Bowser activated another Warp Pipe, while they were still inside the fortress, they would be trapped in a deadly tornado of stone, metal, and lava. But without passing through the dark fortress, they were dead anyway.

After taking a calming breath, Peach grasped the heavy wooden beam that served as the lock for the wooden doors, only to discover it was too much for her to lift. Peach had never been very good at Physical Education in Princess Academy. Her hobbies were things like baking, dancing, reading, maybe a little golf or tennis. Then Daisy’s hands appeared by hers, grasping onto the wooden beam, followed by Toadette, the three Koopas, and Madame Flurrie, who hooted encouragement in her sing-song stage voice. “All together, sweeties! Ready, steady, go!”

Even Goombario and Goombella helped, though without hands they were forced to get creative. Goombella stood on Goombario’s head, pressing the top of her own head against the bottom of the wooden latch. One the word “Go!” Goombella leapt up to shove the wooden latch free, and the rest of the group pulled it up and away from the doors.

Still trying to catch her breath, Peach thrust open the doors, and the group disappeared inside.

…

Vivian the Shadow Siren was resting, deep within the shadows of the fortress. She loved the thrill of travelling through the shadows, but she never liked hiding in them for long, especially not alone. The endless darkness only brought back memories of her life before meeting Mario.

Over time, Vivian had taught herself not to dwell on those long, dark days… Or was it years…or decades? Vivian did not know how old she was. She only knew that she was born of the shadows, to serve *the* shadow.

Only Vivian’s elder sister, Beldam, had ever spoken to the Shadow Queen, before the demon was sealed behind the Thousand-Year Door for the first time. So Vivian was certain she wasn’t a day older than 1001 years old, but apart from that, she had no way of knowing how long she had desperately served Beldam. Vivian would have shaken her shadowy head, but within the shadow, she had no head, so she shook her hat instead, talking to herself. “Knock it off, Vivi! Don’t dwell on the past…think, rather, of pleasant things…”

So, instead of thinking about the days before she met Mario, she thought of the day she met Mario. Or rather, the *days* she had met Mario, since she had gotten to meet him twice. And, in a way, both times she had met Mario, it was her first time meeting Mario.

…

The first time she had met Mario, she had been under orders to capture or kill him, only to get soundly trounced. Later, she and her sister Marilyn had been dragged into the shadows, and soundly trounced again, as punishment for their failure. Technically, Beldam had been the one most responsible for their failure, but that never stopped Beldam from dishing out “punishment.”

At the time, it had been one of the worst days in Vivian’s entire life. But, in another way, it was really the best day of her life, although she didn’t recognize it at the time, because that was the *first* day she first met Mario.

The *second* day she first met Mario was even more wonderful, although she didn’t recognize *him* at the time. Vivian had been stumbling around in the dreary, dusk of Twilight Town, sobbing after another long day of emotional and physical abuse, when she stumbled across a strange, faceless man, cloaked in shadow, who offered her help.

It was the first time in her entire life that anyone had helped her. After thanking the mysterious stranger, Vivian couldn’t help but wonder how he came to be a wandering shadow. As it turned out, the man had been cursed by a ghostly sorcerer, who stole not only the poor man’s face, but his very name. Furthermore, the black magic had robbed him of the ability to pronounce the letter “p.” Not even Vivian had heard of such uncanny witchcraft, but because the shadow man had been so kind as to help her, she made up her mind to stick with him, and help him in return.

One delightful adventure later, Vivian and her new friend discovered the secret of the sorcerer’s true name, the source of his arcane power. Vivian had followed her new friend, her only friend, into battle, to help him reclaim his stolen name and face, only to discover…that he had been Mario all along. “Mario? The guy who stole your name and body is Mario...That means YOU'RE Mario?!?”

Her friend, her only friend, was her enemy. She thought of the fierce punishment that awaited her, if she failed to capture him for Beldam. Not listening to Mario’s answer, Vivian had turned away. “I can't believe it...All this time I was helping Mario... I feel like an idiot…”

Vivian had slipped into the shadows, weeping softly. She had abandoned Mario to his death…but not even that would be enough for Beldam.

…

Vivian’s shining eyes blinked back tears. Even the best day of her life was marked with regrets.

A ghostly spectre appeared before Vivian. Lady Bow made a terrifying face, before giggling at the sight of her friend. “Señorita Vivian? I hope I didn’t frighten you. I was just getting into character for our fight with Mario. Gweh, heh, heh! It’s like Halloween has come early!”

Lady Bow flashed her ornate fan dramatically, before examining Vivian’s face more closely, and shutting her fan with a snap. “You’re awful deep in the shadows. I can barely see you.”

Vivian smiled. “Don’t worry, Lady Bow. I always visit the shadows before a big fight, even if it’s only for fun. It helps me clear my mind of distractions.”

Lady Bow stared into Vivian’s eyes for a moment, looking skeptical. “I see. Forgive my curiosity, your way of moving *through* the shadows is strange, even to me. I don’t suppose you could teach me the trick of it?”

Vivian shook her hat, emerging from the shadows just far enough that her head and hair began to reappear in a ghostly outline. “I don’t suppose you could teach me the trick of turning invisible, outside the shadows?”

Lady Bow cackled, her laughter both beautiful and horrifying. “Not unless you’ve died recently. And it’s not merely invisibility. Cower in fear, for I possess the power of…intangibility! Oooooooo!”

Lady Bow waved her fan through Vivian’s hat, with such a melodramatic, ghostly air, Vivian couldn’t help but smile, and partially emerge from the deep shadows, into the dim, flickering torchlight of the fortress. “That’s an interesting power. How exactly does *not* being able to hit things help in a fight?”

Lady Bow scowled, prettily. “Bah! Have you no imagination? But, of course you do! It is all a matter of creativity! If I cannot hit anything, then nothing can hit me, or my friends…so long as they sit perfectly still.”

“Bet you used that to spirit Mario out of harm’s way a few times.”

“Aye, Caramba! That darling man is always finding new ways to get himself killed. And speaking as one who has shuffled off this mortal herself, I can’t say I’d recommend it. I’ll have to be careful *not* to scare our friends to death. It’s been so long since I’ve had a good haunt, I’m afraid I’m rusty.”

“...How did you meet Mario, anyway?”

Lady Bow flourished her fan. “Gwaaaah, ha ha! If you can believe it, I caught him breaking and entering into my mansion. I couldn’t resist spooking him just a tiny little bit. But once we were introduced properly, he immediately offered to help me liberate the poor people of my pueblo from the cruel tyranny of Tubba Blubba. Truly, Mario is a caballero!”

“That sounds just like him. Mario never stops helping people.”

“Ah! Your voice betrays you! You, also, have a tale to tell of Mario, and how he helped you, in your hour of need? Do tell!”

With a sigh, Vivian sank back partially into the shadows. “I’m afraid it’s a long story. And there are parts of it…well, let’s just say when Mario found me, I was in a dark place.”

To Vivian’s surprise, Lady Bow kissed her lightly on each cheek. “Say no more! A story is a sacred thing. Your story is yours to tell, or not to tell. I must ask you to forgive me, yet again, for my intrusion.”

“Oh no, I love telling the story…but maybe, after the fight?”

Lady Bow trembled, then began to swing and parry her fan like a sword. “Si, si, por supuesto! I can almost feel my bones again, from shivering. Bowser was a terrifying foe, but can you imagine fighting Mario? Squeee! He’s so ferocious in battle! Do you think he’ll get rough with us…if push comes to shove?”

As she snapped her fingers and produced a small candle flame, Vivian flashed a minxish smile. “I don’t have to imagine…Mario would thrash us, in a *real* fight. But he’s a gentle soul. He’d never go all out in a little sparring match.”

Lady Bow’s eyes went wide before she screamed, her cry like a death rattle, then prodded Vivian’s chest with her folded fan. “Gweaaah! You tease! So you’ve fought Mario, have you? All right then, keep your secrets. But since you *love* telling that story so much, I *shall* have that story out of you, sooner or later, Señorita Vivian!”

A tremor travelled through the shadowy walls of the castle, followed by a distant, low rumble. Still partially within the shadows, Vivian sensed the strangeness of it more deeply. Nothing should have been able to touch her in the shadows. “What was that?”

Lady Bow examined their surroundings. “Peach warned us that the experience of loading into the world of the Mario Maker would feel disorienting at first. After all, it has to create an entire reality around us. Still, it’s *strange* that I was able to feel that…I wouldn’t have felt an earthquake that strongly.”

Vivian sprang fully out of the shadows, holding up her finger of flame to examine the stone walls and corridors. Flaming wheels of fire spun on axles attached to the floor and ceiling, to act as obstacles. “It looks like our level has fully loaded. We’ll be seeing our first opponents soon enough. I hope they’re beating Bowser at least.”

…

As Luigi rolled out of the way of Bowser's sharp tiger-claw strike, he caught Bowser's arm and responded with a well-timed gut punch. Bowser gagged as he felt the blow sink deep into his soft tummy, then swung wildly with his free arm. Luigi felt five pointed fingernails scrape across his face, but didn't blink. Using his grip on Bowser's arm and waist, Luigi shifted his weight and twisted his body to perform a judo hip throw, the Uki-Goshi. Bowser felt Luigi giving him a warm, tender, loving hug, before Bowser was bodily thrown to the ground, breaking the power of the red mushroom coursing through him. Bowser rolled onto his back, then struggled to get up thanks to his own half-shell.

Luigi mentally counted, waiting for the power of the mushroom to fully dissipate, then slammed his fist down onto his downed opponent's face. He didn't know how Bowser had gotten another red mushroom, but without its power, Bowser could be beaten. Luigi winced as he felt the blow connect, fighting his own subconscious, his own eyes seeing Bowser's face as that of Princess Peach.

He had won. But Luigi felt like a heel. All he could think about was how he had just hit an opponent while he was down…while *she* was down? Wiping his eyes on the back of his sleeve, Luigi turned to call over his shoulder. "Parakarry? Can you fly? Maybe if you double-back you can help the others–"

"Watch out!" howled Parakarry, pointing to something behind Luigi.

As Luigi spun, he saw Bowser rising up from the ground, winding up an uppercut punch. The Koopa King's new breasts jiggled as the power of a red mushroom filled his chest. But that was impossible? Bowser didn't have a red mushroom?

Bowser's fist slammed against the underside of Luigi's jaw, and with a echoing crack, Luigi was sent flying into the air, diminishing in height, deflating back to his original, lanky build, before he crashed down on top of one of the red toadstool trees, leaving behind a perfect Luigi-shaped silhouette.

…

"Mario! Where are you guys?" howled Lakilester as he wove past the trunks of the toadstool trees. But far above, Mario was hopping across the mushroom tops that formed the forest canopy, which muffled the sound of Lakilester's voice.

As Mario carried Gonzales Junior and Ms. Mowz in either arm, he sprinted across a floating metal bridge that was connected to midair by a cable. As it snapped and fell away beneath him, Mario leapt for the next floating platform.

Goznales Junior growled, unable to free himself from Mario's fatherly grasp. "Gonzales! Let me carry you!"

“No. You’re at your limit, kid!”

Ms. Mowz squeaked, in the way a mother mouse must squeak when her baby mice are being fussy. “He’s right, you know. Discretion is the better part of valor!”

Gonzales Junior pouted. “But I don’t *want* discretion, I want valor!”

Mario stuck the landing on the next set of mid-air cable-connected steel girders, before diving toward the goalpost. There was no need to grab the flag. Once he reached the fortress…

The entire ground in front of the flagpole collapsed and fell away all at once, and the base of the flagpole started to totter over the edge just as Mario landed on it. Mario jumped up and forward wildly, and saw only air. Mario held tight to Gonzales Jr. and Ms. Mowz with either arm.

…

Another tremor rippled through the dark fortress, with such force it sent Vivian rocking forward as the shadowy torch light danced beneath her. Lady Boo was unaffected, but gripped her fan like a dagger, alert for danger. Near the end of the fortress corridor, a few Podoboos were hopping in and out of the lava. Lady Bow caught a glimpse of a small, electrical baby amongst them. As she bounced up and down wildly, Watt the Sparkie easily knocked one of the living balls of lava out of the way. “Hey, Bo-bo! There you are! There’s something really important I’m s’posed to tell you! …Oh, what was it?”

The wooden doors slammed open, and Peach appeared at the front of the charging throng, all of them screaming at once.

Watt skipped out of the boiling lava, and floated towards Lady Bow and Vivian. “Oh, yeah, Bowser broke something and now the world is getting all busted up, and our friends are all in trouble, so no fighting allowed, unless it’s Bowser.”

Cracks appeared in the brick walls on all sides, and a couple pebbles dropped from the ceiling.

Then one of the flaming wheels on the ceiling tore free, followed by a chunk of the stone ceiling itself, as big as a Thwomp. Peach held up a hand to warn the others to halt, but felt the shadow of the debris pass over her. There was no time to think. She couldn’t retreat, not without crashing into her friends behind her. Peach dove forward, narrowly passing under the fiery wheel before it ripped through the stone floor, leaving behind a molten hole that revealed the steep drop below. Like a ballerina, Peach was forced to leap lightly, up and away from the flames.

Spotting Peach’s distress, Daisy kicked off the wall to bypass the molten floor. As the two-ton boulder tumbled toward Peach, both Princesses made a split-second, life or death decision.

Daisy dove forward, planning to grab Peach and throw her forward out of the path of the stone, even if it cost Daisy her own arm, or her life. “Peach, move!”

But at precisely the same moment, Peach ducked backward to press herself against the wall, hoping to get out of the path of the debris. “Daisy, stop!”

They both had a good plan, and they both nearly worked. Peach felt the stone pillar pass in front of her by an inch. Daisy swung her arm back at the last moment, and twisted in mid air as she dove forward, out of the path of the same boulder, before it easily smashed through the stone floor.

Then the entire wall Peach was leaning against cracked, and began to angle forward. The second wheel of fire snapped loose and rolled straight into Daisy’s path. And in that frozen moment, both Princess Daisy and Princess Peach had the same thought. *“Oh. I’m dead.”*

…

Just as Mario prepared to tumble to his doom, Spike the Lakitu appeared from the sky, snatching Mario by the back of his overall straps. “Gotcha! Hoo boy! Mario, you gotta lay off the pasta!”

The last of the pathway crumbled away to nothing, stopping only once it reached the entrance of the fortress. There was a tense moment, as Spike slowly drifted toward the fortress entrance. They could only pray that it wouldn’t collapse underneath them, too. They all winced as they alighted. Then they saw cracks spread through the walls in a spider-web pattern, and Mario rushed to action, carrying an exhausted Spike along with him.

Ms. Mowz clicked her teeth. “Oooh! I hate these cheesy cliffhanger endings!”

[End of Chapter XII]

Bowsette's Princess Lessons
Chapter XIII: The Old Bomb and the Sea

Bowser spat out a second tooth, then began to stroll toward the warp zone, humming the tune to the hit song, *Ignorance is Bliss,* by Jellyfish. Parakarry tried to fly, before his lame wing sent him careening to the ground at Luigi's side. As Parakarry forced himself to his feet, he put up his fists to defend Luigi, but Bowser just sauntered past him, whistling.

His breath shaky, Parakarry rounded on Bowser. "Stop, in the name of the law!"

Bowser halted, turned slowly to look over the trembling Parakoopa, then tapped a dainty finger against his cheek. "Go ahead. Take your best shot! First one's free."

Parakarry swallowed, and tried to force his legs to move, to no avail. Years had passed since he had looked death in the face in Tubba Blubba's fortress, and blinked. Nothing had changed. Parakarry knew he was a coward.

Bowser sneered. "Yeah. That's what I…thought?"

Parakarry sensed movement behind him, and turned to find Luigi rising to his feet, a trickle of blood running down his mouth. Luigi gasped. "...Not one more step, Bowser."

Bowser scowled. "Ya' know, there's courage, then there's just plain bull-headedness. No more magic mushrooms, Luigi! You literally cannot hurt me. Not 'literally,' in the figurative sense, but *literally* literally. I know you Luigi…"

Bowser grinned, almost sweetly. "...Once a coward, always a coward."

As Bowser blinked, Parakarry launched into the air, withdrawing into his shell to perform a flying shell shot technique. With a start, Bowser ducked back and rolled, letting his shoulder take the brunt of the force. As Parakarry felt the bone in his sprained wing snap, he careened wildly before crash landing back into the stone steps.

With a snarl, Bowser gripped his bruised shoulder. Luigi charged and attempted a gut punch, only for his knuckles to bounce uselessly against Bowser's six-pack abs. Snatching Luigi by the straps of his overalls, Bowser looked Luigi dead in the eyes, his eyes flashing red.
"No…more…kid gloves!"

Bowser pitched Luigi like a fast ball straight toward Parakarry, who barely managed to break Luigi's fall before they both crashed into the brick steps with a crunch.

Bowser clapped his hands together. "There, that was your one free hit. Anyone *else* want a piece of me?"

With an explosion like cannon fire, Bombette shot toward Bowser from behind, aiming for the back of his skull. Her aim was slightly off. As Bombette crashed against the crown atop Bowser's head with a clang, he rocked forward with a howl of pain, but the crown remained firmly fixed to his head.

As she felt herself start to ricochet, Bombette rolled to aim herself high, and managed to avoid crashing into Luigi and Parakarry. She came careening to a halt against the top step, her body sinking halfway into the solid stone. Bombette's little feet flailed as she struggled to free herself.

Clutching his throbbing skull, Bowser stamped his feet as he war danced in a tight circle. "Argh! Can't I finish one freakin' sentence without someone interrupting–"

As Bowser turned, he spotted the other annoying Bob-omb, the one with the sailor hat and magnificent mustache, rolling onto his feet. "Give up, land-lubberl! We've got you bang to rights!"

Smoke billowed from Bowser's nostrils. "You've got me bang to *nothing!* All you're managing to do is get on my nerves!"

Bowser heard Luigi's voice barking at him from behind. "Bowser!"

For a moment, Luigi managed to stand, tall and true, like a majestic hero of old, shielding the crumpled form of Parakarry, who was down for the count. "We won't let you hurt our friends!"

Immediately, Luigi's legs gave out and he tripped forward off the steps, catching himself on his hands and knees.

Bombette popped out of the perfectly spherical crater she'd left behind in the solid stone, then stamped her feet. "We won't let you escape!"

Pink flame sparked to life in Bowser's throat, his eyes fixing on Bombette's braided pony-tail that doubled as an explosive fuse. "I am a free man. Now, stand down, before you get–"

But as Bowser spoke the words, the pink flames leapt from his throat of their own accord, sparking Bombette's fuse. As the hot pink bob-omb girl felt the fuse counting down with each second, she spotted Luigi and Parakarry below her, and dove up and behind the stone steps to shield them from the impending blast.

Admiral Bobbery's eyes went wide as he saw the flash of light, before he heard the explosion.

…

Admiral Bobbery was sitting alone, knocking back another drink Podley's Place. The old Bob-omb held up his frosty root beer mug, his face flushed. "Podley! Another round!"

Podley shook his head as he struggled to wipe a stubborn spot off a shot glass. “You’ve had six Chuckola Colas already, ya’ old sea dog! Haven’t you heard that too much sugar is bad for you?”

“Balderdash! You’re no help! If I wanted a tough-love lecture, I’d ask my–” His head swimming, Bobbery examined the dregs of his drink, before he slammed down a few gold coins to pay off his tab and stormed out.

Bobbery lurched down the filthy streets of Rogueport’s east side, fumbling with his keys as he approached his meager private shack. Just as he was about to turn and enter his home, he rammed smack into someone. “Confound it all! Watch where you’re going!”

Admiral Bobbery looked up to find a foreign-looking man in a red hat, with a magnificent mustache that rivaled even his own. Before the strange man could speak, a motley bunch of the stranger’s companions leapt to his side, all talking at once.

A scholarly-looking young goomba woman pressed her face close against Admiral Bobbery, “Hey! You were *totally* the one who smacked into him!”

A withdrawn looking Koopa intervened, looking unabashedly at the ferocious Goomba girl. “Uh…sorry about that, sir. Say…you look like you know your way around a ship. We’re looking for a certain sailor, maybe you know him?”

A buxom cloud spirit with big lips and purple hair appeared in a rush of wind. “Surely you do! He is a sailor man, bold and true, unafraid of the treacherous tempests of the stormy seas!”

A baby yoshi jumped up onto the back of the mysterious mustached man, sending his red hat flopping down over his eyes. To Bobbery’s surprise, the baby Yoshi started to roar with a perfect professional wrestling announcer voice. “Yeah! We’re heading to Keelhaul Key, to lay a spankin’ down on some evil spirits and eldritch abominations!”

Admiral Bobbery backed away from the bizarre group, puffing his mustache. “I have no interest in passing the time with you, so sorry. Now, away with you!”

But as he turned to face his shadow, he saw his shadow looking back at him with two glowing yellow eyes, before a young woman with pink hair emerged from his own shadow to stand before him. At least, Admiral Bobbery thought the shadow might be a girl. Bobbery had seen his share of supernatural oddities during this time at sea, but the eerie shadow boy/girl thing took the cake, and ate it too. He was speechless.

The shadow brushed her hair aside, looking serious. “Please, it’s urgent. We’re told there’s only one sailor who’s ever dared brave the voyage to Keelhaul Key, and returned to tell the tale.”

A mouse wearing a red mask scampered around their feet, then flashed Admiral Bobbery a shameless wink. “I’ve heard he’s a ruggedly handsome old salt. Had quite a reputation around here for being a lady killer in his younger days….I’m sure he’s aged like fine wine!”

The Goomba girl glowered at the mouse. “Wait, what are you still following us around for? Are you, like, trying to pick our pockets?”

The mouse licked her thumb as she counted dollar bills out of a ratty looking wallet. “Don’t be absurd, sweetie. You have absolutely nothing worth stealing in your purse. And of course I’m following you, because I’m joining your little adventure on the high seas!”

The Goomba girl gnashed her prominent, buck teeth. “What? Since when? Who invited you to join our party?”

The mouse sniffed. “Mario did, of course.”

The Goomba did a double-take, then rounded on the man in the red hat. “What? Mario! Why didn’t we talk about this?”

Mario held up his hand. “Mama mia! Not now! Please, sir, we’re looking for Admiral Bobbery. He’s the only one who can help us. Do you know him?”

Admiral Bobbery stared deep into the foreign man’s eyes…Mario, they called him? Maybe it was partially because of the mustache, but he was strangely reminded of a younger version of himself. "You seek Admiral Bobbery?”

The entire band held their breath.

With a huff, Bobbery turned away, struggling to hold his keys steady as he unlocked his front door. As the door popped open, Admiral Bobbery stumbled inside and glowered at the strangers. “...Never heard of the gent. Take your search elsewhere…”

He slammed the door behind him, and locked it from inside.

Admiral Bobbery rifled through a crate of his prized bottles of Chuckola Reserve, before a wedding photo of him and Scarlette caught his eye at the bottom of the crate. The picture rekindled a buried memory: years ago, he’d brought home the vintage cola as a belated anniversary gift, after a harrowing voyage to the Beanbean Kingdom. The photo had been mouldering in that crate, ever since…

Bobbery poured a glass, and downed it, before collapsing onto one of the two wooden stools in his dreary, spare shack. Minutes passed, perhaps hours, as he sipped slowly on a second glass, then a third, and then a fourth. All he wanted…was to forget…

Then he heard a clatter, and a cloud of dust and ash erupted from his chimney. A group of people emerged from the fireplace, coughing and spluttering. Mario shot to his feet, his face stained with soot, his hat askew.

Admiral Bobbery snarled. “What do you blokes want?”

Mario hacked, before meeting him face to face. “...Admiral Bobbery!”

Bobbery stiffened, the sugar rush from the Chuckola Cola making it hard for him to think clearly. “Admiral Bobbery? I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about. Now, if you please…”

“Don’t play dumb with us!” roared the Goomba girl.

The Koopa struggled to roll up off his back, his tortoise shell making it difficult. “Umm…listen, we already heard that you’re–”

The plump wind spirit arose from the cloud of smoke, like a cloud of smoke, before shaking off the coat of ash that covered her. “Oh, drop this *sham*, sir!”

The Baby yoshi jabbed Bobbery in the chest. “That’s right, Super ‘Stache! You’ve been unmasked!”

The shadow girl reappeared. “Please, don't insult us...We already know you're the admiral, so just admit it!”

The mouse scampered up, and threw herself onto Admiral Bobbery, affecting a swooning faint. “See? No need to be so coy, Admiral!”

Admiral Bobbery let the swooning mouse flop to the floor without catching her. “Harumph! What poppycock...Tell me, what would you want with me if I *were* this chap?”

Mario spoke in a low voice. “I need you to take me to Keelhaul Key!”

Ignoring the lingering effects of the Chuckola Cola, Admiral Bobbery squared up against the younger man. “Oh, your ship needs a navigator, and you want me to do the job, mmm? ...So sorry, but you'll have to look elsewhere. I shall set sail upon the sea...nevermore!”

Mario’s companions all started talking over one another, shouting various protests.

“But... Look, we're begging you here! You totally have to!” pleaded the Goomba.

“But... But... But... But…” stammered the Koopa.

“Show some compassion, dear man. Don't make us beg! We simply must have you!” howled the wind spirit.

The baby Yoshi clawed at his mohawk. “That's just not cool! You wanna see me beg or something? Is that it?”

The shadow girl, who had floated to the back of the group, popped forward to catch Admiral Bobbery by surprise from behind. “But... Maybe you don't understand how important this is. We *need* you.”

The mouse girl arose, dusting herself off, then twirled her finger through Admiral Bobbery’s mustache. “Oh, don’t be like that! Without you, we'll surely meet our ends on the way to Keelhaul Key!”

Ignoring the flirtatious mouse, Admiral Bobbery scoffed and turned his attention to Mario. “Awfully sorry, dear boy, but when I say ‘no,’ what I mean is...NO!”

Admiral Bobbery opened the door with a yank, and bobbed his head to direct the unwelcome guests out. “Now, away with you!”

The group looked to Mario, seemingly awaiting his lead. Without another word, Mario led them out, his face stern.

After locking the door behind them, Admiral Bobbery tried to pour another glass of Chuckola Cola, trembling with rage. Finding the bottle empty, he threw it against the wall, and kicked the crate over, knocking it open and sending bottles of wine-flavored cola shattering and rolling across the floor. The photograph of him and Scarlette on their wedding day fluttered to the ground. Admiral Bobbery ripped the cork out of the bottle with his teeth, then began to chug the entire contents.*

[*Author’s note: That is extremely dangerous, kids. Please do not try that at home. Also, please drink fizzy, carbonated beverages responsibly.]

As Bobbery felt his vision blur, he spotted the photograph, starting to stain red in a pool of cola.

Slurring his speech, Admiral Bobbery dropped the bottle and snatched up the photo, trying to dab the liquid away with a rag, but it was too late. He had stained it. It was ruined forever. His last memento of Scarlette: another precious, forgotten memory.

All alone in his run-down, ramshackle house, Admiral Bobbery wept.

He never knew how long he languished there. It might have been hours. It might have been days. But at some point, Admiral Bobbery awoke with a splitting headache. The crash after a sugar rush always did numbers on him. Spotting the broken bottles, he barked an order at a

sailor who wasn't there. "Crewman! *Hic* Get that disgraceful mess cleaned up! I want the below-decks in tip-top ship-shape…ship…"

When it finally occurred to him he wasn't on his ship, Admiral Bobbery groaned. After pouring himself a cup of black coffee, which did almost nothing to alleviate his soda-chugging-induced hangover, Bobbery set to work cleaning the mess, until every sliver of glass was swept up, and every drop of wine was scrubbed away. By the time he was finished, his single-room abode was still sparse, but at least it was spick and span.

Then Mario fell down the chimney again, followed by all six of his companions in quick succession, forming a dog pile. Bobbery choked, then stomped toward Mario, wheezing. "What?!? Oh, by Blabberton's beard! Not you again! No matter how many times you entreat me, my stance is firm! Now away with you!"

Mario held up a sealed envelope, gasping for air. "...Have a letter! From…your–"

Admiral Bobbery snatched the envelope, examining it skeptically. "Pardon? A letter, you say? F-for me?"

Then he saw his wife's signature on the outside, addressing it to him. "What?!? Scarlette!!! This is Scarlette's handwriting!!!"

His eyes watering, Bobbery opened the letter, afraid he might drop it. "Scarlette, my love…"

He read it aloud, no longer even aware of the strangers present.

"My love: if you're reading this letter, then I am no longer by your side. Because fate has stepped between us, I have decided to write you this letter. If you're reading this, I must have passed away while you were out to sea…

"I can only assume that you will blame yourself for it, my sweet Bobbery. Although my life was short, you gave me more than a lifetime's worth of joy. Though you will mourn, I beg that you remember that time, like love, is a tide. You are one with the sea, as you were one with me. Do not lose both your life's loves."

Bobbery choked, repeating the last line. Something about the sound of the words struck him. "Time, like love, is a tide. You are one with the sea...as you were one with me..."

Blinking back tears, Bobbery suddenly remembered the crowd of trespassers who had invaded his private residence. "A... A thousand pardons...But may I have a moment alone, if you please?"

There was a pregnant pause, before they all escorted themselves out. All of them looked sheepishly at one another, except for Mario, who seemed perfectly calm. When they were gone,

Bobbery carefully stored the note in his navigator's log for safekeeping, along with the stained photograph. "Yes, love... I WAS happy...My sweet, sweet Scarlette...I love you still."

Outside, Mario leaned silently against the dilapidated fence that marked Admiral Bobbery's property, letting his friends argue amongst themselves about what had just happened.

Then Admiral Bobbery kicked his own door down from inside his house, startling everyone except for Mario. Fixing his sailor's hat back on, Admiral Bobbery strutted to meet them. "Now then! You were looking for a navigator, I believe? Bound for Keelhaul Key? Harumph! If you think an old sea bomb like me is what you need, then let's shove off!"

In the years since his grand voyage with Mario, Admiral Bobbery had poured over that same letter, time and time again, until he had it memorized. But there was one part of the letter he never shared with Mario. A post-script, Scarlette had written on the outside of the letter: "...P.S. If I *do* kick the bucket, I suggest you be a gentleman, and mourn for me for at least a year before you fall in love with some hot little firecracker, and run off to elope with her, just like we did. Now, I know what you're thinking: 'Scarlette, I'd never do that! I'll love you forever and ever!' To which, I say, codswallop! Grieve for me, Bobbery. But don't be afraid to love again, out of some misplaced notion that you're betraying my memory. If there's one thing I know about you, it's that you are a man with love in his heart. Let this be my *memento mori:* if I can't be there to love you, I hope you will find someone to share your love with, and who loves you right back…P.P.S. When you find her, give her a little slap on the caboose, and a kiss from me! –Scarlette!"

When Bobbery had finally read the postscript, he'd been annoyed at Scarlette for days. It was as if she was still finding new ways to tease him, from beyond the grave.

Later, when Mario introduced Bobbery to an old friend, a peppy pink Bob-omb girl by the name of Bombette, there was nothing particularly romantic about their first meeting. Bobbery had found her bright and peppy, full of vim and vinegar, and enjoyed the rousing tales of her adventures with Mario. But there was certainly no "falling in love at first sight." No swelling, romantic musical cues, no choir of angels.

After helping Mario save the world from the demonic Shadow Queen, Admiral Bobbery had returned to his true home: aboard his own ship again. While sailing the high seas, he had taken the time to grieve for Scarlette properly, not wallow in self-loathing, as he had done for far too many years. A year later, his voyages took him to the Mushroom Kingdom. After hearing rumors of the return of Bowser's puppet dictator, King Bob-omb, he visited Bob-omb Fortress, where he met the leaders of the Mushroom Kingdom bob-ombs who wore pink as a sign of their loyalty to Crown Princess Peach, the rightful heir to the throne. And who did he meet there…but Bombette.

And after a few days of seeing each other, sharing their old memories, both sweet and painful, Bombette had surprised him by asking him out.

…

Admiral Bobbery saw the limp body of Bombette soaring into the sky, before she came plummeting down, with a sickening clang of metal against stone. She didn't get up.

Bowser snorted at the sight, before rounding on Admiral Bobbery, jabbing his thumb at Bombette's crumpled frame. "You Bob-ombs have a serious design flaw, if you ask me."

As Admiral Bobbery's sailor rope fuse sparked with flame, tears filled his eyes. "You…how dare you! *That's my PINKY!!!"*

As he exploded, Admiral Bobbery steered the sailor's helm wheel he wore on his back in place of a Bob-omb key, using it to guide his trajectory in midair. The arc angled Admiral Bobbery upward, so that as he slammed into Bowser's stomach, they both rose up and over Luigi and Parakarry's heads. Then Bobbery angled downward and ignited again, aiming well below Bombette's prone body. Bobbery smashed Bowser straight through the brick steps, layer after layer, knocking the power of the red mushroom right out of Bowser as they went. They erupted from the opposite side of the stone staircase, sailed over a series of orange warp pipes, and finally crashed to a halt against a brick wall on the far end of the tower. Bowser and Admiral Bobbery both fell to the ground, punchdrunk from the impact. As Bowser rolled onto his back, his arm flopped limply against the orange warp pipe nearest him. With a buzz, it began to warm up, preparing to activate its magic: it was ready to warp the first person who entered it to the end of the course at World 8.

As the Mario Maker glitched, a soft tremor rippled through the ground beneath them. The tremor itself froze, then disappeared, then repeated, as the entire world began to experience lag. The earthquake seemed to blip out of existence, only to be replaced by a continual, rumbling buzz.

Bowser wanted to scream, but he didn't even have the energy to groan anymore. As he clawed at the orange pipe to support his weight, Bowser spotted the unconscious form of Admiral Bobbery at his feet. Pixelated words in white letters flickered to life above them, floating alongside the clouds. "Welcome to the Warp Zone."

There was no one left to stop him. Bowser was home free.

…

Toadette, Goombario, Goombella, Koops, Kooper, Koopie-Koo, and Madame Flurrie all shielded their eyes as the molten stone created a fog of boiling steam before them, blocking their path. Behind it, they could just make out the voices of Princess Daisy and Princess Peach.

"Peach! Move!" shouted Princess Daisy.

"Daisy! Stop!" cried Princess Peach.

With a mighty breath of chill wind, Madame Flurrie extinguished the flames. As the molten stone began to cool, they spotted Princess Peach and Daisy, but too late. The stone wall was already collapsing inward, about to squash Peach like a pancake, while a flaming wheel of death was about to cut Daisy in half.

And that would have been the end of their story, were it not for Lady Bow the Boo and Vivian the Shadow Siren.

Ignoring the deadly falling debris, Lady Bow phased through everything in her path to reach Princess Daisy. “Daisy! Stop!” screeched Lady Bow.

Traveling at the speed of shadow, Vivian emerged from Princess Peach’s own shadow, grabbing the stunned Princess around the waist. “Peach! Move!” squealed Vivian.

Daisy froze, then felt a tingling thrill as the deadly wheel of fire passed directly through her stomach, cutting a path through the stone wall behind her and flying outside into nothingness. Daisy clutched her torso, and sure enough, her toned, tanned tomboy tummy was still there! Then Lady Bow released her icy embrace on Daisy, and with a chill, Daisy realized that she had literally been in the grip of death.

Then Daisy spotted the wall smashed flat against the floor where Peach had been standing an instant before. But before Daisy could cry out, Peach and Vivian emerged from a shadow, in the exact same position they were a moment ago, except that they were now on top of the collapsed wall, instead of underneath it.

With a bang, the Goombella, Goombario, and Toadette appeared, each riding on the back of a Koopa as they shot over the debris and landed by Peach and Daisy. Goombario shouted as he hopped off Kooper to let Peach ride in his place. “Princess! Get on board! We’ve gotta’ Koopa Surf outta’ here!”

As Goombella let Princess Daisy hop aboard Koops, Vivian surveyed the group. “Where’s Mario?”

Goombella shook her head as they prepared to take off. “He’s with Spike, Gonzales Jr. and Ms. Mowz. They’re catching up.”

Vivian clutched herself. “You left Mario behind? How could you, Goombella?”

Hearing the hurt in Vivian’s voice, Goombella started to answer, her voice cracking. “We had no choice! Mario ordered us to stop Bowser at any cost! If we don’t–”

But as Goombella turned, Vivian was gone. More cracks appeared in the walls behind them.

Princess Peach pointed ahead to the end of the harrowing hallway. “Move!”

As the Koopas launched forward, Madame Flurrie and Lady Bow flew alongside them toward the exit ahead. Around them, the shadows seemed to dance in the chaotic light from all sides.

…

Mario felt the floor giving away beneath him with each step as he sprinted down the collapsing chamber. Spike the Lakitu was still trying to catch his breath from his last two rescue attempts, and could only hold on to Mario’s overall suspenders and drift along, wheezing.

Ms. Mowz lay humming sweetly over Mario’s shoulder, having apparently decided that if she died today, she might as well enjoy being romantically rescued by a knight in shining armor in the meantime.

Gonzales Jr. flailed his tiny fists as he lay across Mario’s other shoulder, like a fussy baby. “Put me in, coach! I’m rested! Put me in!”

Mario tossed Gonzales Jr. ahead of him, and hopped on the tiny baby’s back. “Go for it!”

Galloping like the mighty steed Beucephalus, if the mighty steed Beucephalus was trapped in the body of a 1-foot tall dinosaur toddler, Gonzales Jr. leapt from crumbling stone to crumbling stone with ease. As their shadow passed alongside them, Mario spotted a familiar face, gazing back at him from his own silhouette. “Vivian?”

Vivian emerged fully and glided along with them, her lower body connecting her to their shadow. “I’m here to save you, Mario!”

“If you want to help me, stop Bowser! He’s the one causing this! If he breaks the Mario Maker–”

As she spotted a flaming Podoboo diving towards Mario’s face, Vivian snapped her fingers to awaken her magic flame, and with a flick of her wrist, sent it flying away into nothingness. “Then we’re all dead anyway. Peach is leading the vanguard. If they need me, I can go right to them. But you need me more now!”

Spike nearly hurled as he bounced wildly behind Mario like a rodeo clown. “Can we please save the couples therapy for *after* we escape imminent death?”

Mario did a double take. “That’s it! That’s exactly what we need!”

Ms. Mowz perked her round ears up. “Couples therapy?”

“No! Vivian’s shadow magic! Vivian, you just teleported here, can’t you teleport everyone out of here?”

“That’s not how traveling through the shadows works. I can’t teleport, I just…find the shadow where I most need to be.”

Ms. Mowz curled her tail. “Okay, Vivi, it’s not teleportation. But suppose you just found a nice shadow for us somewhere where *we* need to be? Far away from here. Say a shady spot in Delfino Plaza?”

Vivian shook her head, her pink hair flying behind her as Mario’s shadow danced and twisted across the terrain. “Not possible. It’s easy to lose your way in the shadows. I have to know *exactly* where I’m going. Or know exactly *whose* shadow I’m going to. Like Mario, or Goombella.”

Mario tried to think, ignoring the torn remains of flaming wheels around them. “What about taking us with you to Goombella’s shadow?”

Vivian bit her finger. “Maybe. I’ve never tried it before…It’s risky.”

Spike peeked his eyes open, glimpsed imminent death approaching them from all sides, and immediately closed his eyes again. “*How* risky?”

“You could fall into the shadows, and *keep* falling, forever and ever.”

Spike’s eyes popped open. As he remembered he could fly, so long as he had his cloud buddy Piff with him, he let go of Mario’s overalls. “On second thought, I’ll just fly. They say it’s the safest way to travel.”

Mario reached out to grab Vivian’s hand, and pulled her up to join him on Gonzales Jr.’s back. “It may be a risk we have to take, if all else fails.”

There was a sudden tremor, which disappeared, followed by a low rumble. Gonzales Jr. nearly stumbled, but caught his footing and carried on, finally starting to outpace the collapsing floor behind him. Just ahead, they could make out the rest of their friends…all alive!

Then the cracked walls shattered like glass, and the wind began to carry the debris in a cyclone. The Mario Maker was loading the next level!

[End of Chapter XIII]

Bowsette's Princess Lessons
Chapter XIV: In Which Bowser Falls for Princess Peach

Bowser struggled to do a pullup, inches away from the top of the orange warp pipe that would drop him near the end of the obstacle course. "Ugh! Stupid *women* and their inferior upper body strength! Why did God have to make them so wimpy?"

With an effort, Bowser climbed to the top of the pipe and stared down. Inside, the magic glowed with a soft, rainbow light. "Freedom!"

Just as Bowser lifted his foot to hop in, Luigi came sailing over the brick staircase, diving down for a midair tackle. As they slammed against the ground, Luigi grappled to pin Bowser, and realized the monster's supernatural strength was gone. "Bowser! Please stop! If you go down that pipe, you'll kill–"

Bowser swiped Luigi across the face, knocking off his hat and leaving behind four thin, red scratches. Without either his former true strength, nor the magical strength of a mushroom, Bowser began to panic. But even without his raw power, he still had primal fighting instincts. Planting his dainty, bare feet, Bowser twisted to escape Luigi's pin, slamming Luigi into the ground behind him, then kicked free of Luigi's grasp entirely. "You…you can't stop me! I'm–"

Luigi landed a knife hand strike against Bowser's slender throat, and as Bowser fought for air, something clicked in his mind. Luigi was stronger than him now. Worse than that, Luigi was a better fighter, fundamentally.

But that didn't make sense. Bowser, after all, was *Bowser.* The King of the Koopas. The baddest of the bad.

Sure, Bowser lost fights, but he never doubted that he was a great fighter. Indeed, as much as he loved fighting, Bowser had never really had to think much about fighting. He was simply born to be one. Do Cheep-Cheep think about swimming? Do Pidgits think about flying? Of course not!

But now, Bowser was getting his tail kicked by Luigi, and there was nothing he could do about it. Dimly, at the back of his mind, he remembered something about eating a mushroom? It seemed like he'd been eating a lot of them, somehow.

Then, the memory of the blond woman, with the face so like Peach's, flashed in his dazed eyes, holding up a red mushroom for him on a silver platter. It was like she was offering him a cheat code. An instant win button.

All this occurred in the time it took for Bowser to feel the impact of Luigi's fist against his face.

Bowser was so pissed off, he somehow forgot his fear. Bowser didn't *want* a cheat code. Bowser didn't *need* a cheat code. He swung wildly at the ghostly woman, knocking away the phantom image of the power up, and felt the back of his hand connect with Luigi's face.

Bowser knew that he was weak. But for a moment, he forgot all about being a woman. He was himself again, in spirit if not in body. In slow motion, he saw Luigi's next strike coming, and had to admire the technique, even as he read Luigi like an open book. Bowser blocked and counter punched, feeling the weakness in his own fist as he sprained his wrist, but pressed forward regardless. As if in a dream, Bowser took Luigi's second punch on the chin, then landed three solid punches on Luigi in a row: a jab, cross, hook combo. Luigi lost his balance and cracked the back of his head against the stone wall behind him, his legs sinking.

And as he saw his opponent was down, Bowser curb-stomped Luigi, full on the chest.

As Luigi felt his ribs crack, he didn't scream. He didn't have enough air in his lungs to scream.

Luigi tried to rise, only to feel Bowser's foot pressing him down, digging into his broken ribs.

Trembling with joy, Bowser leaned over to look Luigi in the eyes. "You lose, Luigi…No surprise,there…Because you're a *loser*, Luigi…You've *always* been a loser…You will always *be* a loser…"

Bowser leaned in close to Luigi's ear, as if for a kiss. "...You're nothing but a discount Mario."

Luigi gurgled. "You're…gonna…kill them! If you go through that pipe…Mario…Daisy…"

Bowser guffawed, then dug his heel into Luigi's chest one final time as he stepped back. "Hey, I was already gonna' escape. You don't have to convince me!"

Bowser turned, and strolled to the warp pipe. But as Bowser gripped the edge and lifted himself up, Luigi gasped one final name. "Peach…you're gonna' kill Peach…is that…what you want?"

Bowser froze, then rounded on Luigi, roaring. "What are you babbling about? I'm not hurting Peach! I just want to be free!"

With his full weight, Bowser stomped on Luigi's chest again. "How am I hurting Peach? ANSWER ME!!!"

Luigi whimpered, then swooned dead away. "I think…you broke something…"

Bowser heard an echoing crack in the distance, like thunder. As he turned, he recognized one of his old fortresses, collapsing in on itself.

…

Carrying Goombario on her back, Peach saw the goal post that marked the end of World 3-4: a hologram of one of her own Toad retainers. Once she reached the finish line, they would only be one course behind Bowser. But even if they did everything perfectly, would they have enough time? What if she couldn't save everyone? If any of them died…if Mario died…it would all be her fault. But she couldn't dwell on that, not now. As she rode on Kooper the Koopa's back, Peach reached out her hand to activate the hologram that represented the goal post, and–

A stone ten times her size tore loose from the crumbling wall and flew into her, knocking her up and away from Kooper. Goombario went spiraling over the top of the stone and came crashing down the other side, just short of the goal post. Daisy reached a hand out and screamed to Peach, but she was already helplessly out of reach. The tornado had caught her.

Peach pointed at the goal post. "Load the next world! Get everyone out of here!"

The stone spiraled as it flew a mile upward, sending Peach flying wildly into nothingness. The world and the sky spun around her, until she had no sense of which was which.

…

Mario saw everything. "Spike! Catch her! You're her only–"

As the wooden bridge snapped and fell away beneath them, Gonzales Junior scrambled to run in mid air. "Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!"

Spike snatched at Mario's overalls again, and Mario pinned the baby Yoshi between his legs to keep him from falling to his death, still cradling Ms. Mowz with one arm. Vivian slipped into his shadow, atop Gonzales Jr's back.

Then, a line of bricks and question mark blocks slammed into Mario's chest, carrying him away into the tornado. As Vivian felt Mario ripped away from his own shadow, she grabbed at his pant leg and reached for his hand, only for gravity to carry her away along with Gonzales Jr.

Spike instinctively grabbed for Vivian's hand as she pulled free from Mario's shadow. Vivian caught Gonzales Jr. with her freehand, while Spike caught Ms. Mowz with his free hand. He was forced to juggle the masked mouse a few times to keep from dropping her.

"Mario!" cried Spike, Vivina, and Ms. Mowz all at once.

"Gonzales!" cried Gonzales Jr.

Mario clutched tight to the pilar of debris. "Spike! Leave me! Get them to safety!"

Spotting the Question Mark block by his face, Mario slammed his fist into it, and found a Red Mushroom. Stuffing it down the collar of his shirt, Mario secured his grip and tried to get his bearings.

And there she was. A tiny flicker of sunlight caught a sliver of Peach's strawberry blond hair, her pink tennis uniform fluttering in the wind, as she tumbled toward him from above.

…

"Peaches!" howled Bowser. As he charged toward the tornado that had torn through the Mario Maker's recreation of his old fortress, Bowser managed to run on mid-air for several feet, before noticing that he was defying the laws of gravity, and dropped like a stone, howling like Goofy.

Trying to swim, Bowser felt his lips flapping from the wind resistance, and tears formed in his eyes. So this was it. Thanks to his own hubris, he had killed the only woman he ever loved, and would now die alone, in a vain struggle to rescue her. A noble, if anticlimactic, death for the King of the Koopas. It'd probably make for a great, Shakespearean tragedy, one day.

But in what he believed to be his last moment on earth, Bowser could only think of one name. *"...Peaches!"*

From far away, an irate female voice seemed to whisper in his ear. *"Peaches? Who the hell is–"*

Deep within Bowser's skull, the spirit of the Crown of Queen Toadstool, AKA Bowsette, was doing some dusting. When was this dullard ever going to catch a hint? Obviously, she had been the one helping him, yet he stubbornly insisted on being the one to drive, leaving her sitting on her shapely haunches, when she could be helping. At the sound of Bowser's distressed cry, Bowsette glanced up to look through Bowser's eyes, as if they were a television screen, and saw for herself who "Peaches" was.

Bowsette squealed as she dropped her feather duster. *"The Heir!"*

As he flailed his arms, Bowser saw a flaming Fire Flower appear before him, just barely within his reach. Two voices screamed in his mind at once, *"Take it, or the Princess dies! Take it, or you die! You have no choice! Just take it!!!"*

As Bowser grasped the Fire Flower, his eyes flashed from red to blue, his hair shimmered from blood red to pale gold, then back again to blood red like a billowing flame, and the torn remnants of his black dress shone blood red, with accents glowing white as sun-light.

And as Bowser felt his hands moving of their one accord, he became aware of the tingling sensation of pink flames engulfing his fingertips, and then his feet. The weightless, sinking pit in his stomach disappeared, and with a rush, Bowser knew that he was flying, though he didn't know how.

…

Both Spike and Piff the Puff were approaching their limit. “Vivian, can you reach Mario’s shadow?”

Vivian’s eyes watered as she watched Mario carried farther and farther away. “Nuh…not if he’s in mid air.”

Ms. Mowz twitched her nose. “Why must the most useful superpowers always come with fine print?”

As Spike started to drift lower, Gonzales Jr. flailed his feet to reach the collapsing path before them. “Spike! Tag me in, dude! Tag me in!”

Defying gravity, Gonzales Jr. caught the sole of his shoe against the edge of the falling stone and leapt back up onto the pathway, carrying his friends behind him as they held hands in a long chain.

Ms. Mowz squeaked as she lost her grip on Spike’s hand, only for him to snatch her by her long tail. “Squeee-EEEEK!!! What about Goombella’s shadow?”

“With all three of you? I’ve never done it before! If we lose one another in the shadows, you’ll be gone forever!”

Spike shook his head as they all whipped back and forth. “No thanks! I’m good! We’ll just catch up the old fashioned way!”

As a section of the floor tore away underneath them, Gonzales Jr. leapt lightly to run along the wall. As the wall crumbled at the base and began to tilt forward, Gonzales Jr. was forced to drop back to the floor, narrowly missing the edge of the hole, and galloped forward. The passengers screamed as they saw the shadow of the collapsing wall pressing in on them. Teardrops flew from Gonzales Jr.’s eyes as he pushed himself with all his might and dove forward, knowing he’d never make it. Then the wall smashed down on the floor, flattening everything underneath it into a pancake.

…

“We’ve gotta’ load the next level!” screamed Goombella, still clinging to Princess Daisy’s back as Koops the Koopa carried them both on his shell.

After Princess Daisy saw her Best Friend Forever From Princess Academy (B.F.F.F.P.A.) carried away by the tornado, she didn’t cry. Like her dad always said, “There’s no crying in baseball!”

Daisy called over her shoulder to Goombella. “Hang tight!”

Leaning into a turn, Daisy scooped up a dazed Goombario with her free hand, and all four careened through the hologram that marked the end of the level. The holographic Toad retainer flickered, and began to speak like a stuck record. “Th-Thank you, Mario! B-but our Princess is in another cast–‘nother cast–‘nother castle!”

As Koops skidded to a halt before the locked and bolted wooden doors, Daisy hopped off his shell and came to an awkward halt. “Huh? Why isn’t it opening?”

Goombella swallowed. “Bowser’s already loaded world 4-1. Maybe the door is glitched?”

As if in answer, the door buzzed, flickered, and reappeared with a heavy slam, the wooden latch rattling. Daisy set down the two Goombas and stretched her arms. “Don’t panic, I’ll just open it the old fashioned way. Goombella, Koops, do a headcount for me. We don’t want to leave anyone behind”

Goombella’s breath caught as she cradled Goombario’s head in her invisible hands, cartoon stars spinning around his skull. “Right! Me, Goombario, Daisy, Koops…Kooper?”

Kooper popped his head out of a crack in the wall, where the tornado had thrown him, and rushed to Goombario’s side. “Here!”

Goombario shook his head, blinking back stars as he slowly recovered from blunt force trauma.

Daisy squatted, gripped the underside of the wooden latch, and deadlift it above her head.

Koops rubbed his head. “That leaves Koopie-Koo, Toadette, Madame Flurrie, Lady Bow–”

“Boo!” said Lady Bow, as she poofed into existence behind Koops.

“Here we are, darling!” cooed Madame Flurrie as she flew alongside Toadette and Koopie-Koo.

Daisy dropped the wooden latch to the floor with a clatter, then slammed her shoulder against the door, leaning her full weight into it. “Help me with this door!”

Madame Flurrie belly flopped into the door, smashing it aside.

“Everyone with arms who can’t fly, on a Koopa!” called Toadette, scooping up Goombario as Koopie-Koo popped back into her shell and prepared to launch another power shell technique.

Goombella searched the horizon, looking for their missing friends. She saw the collapsing ground steadily catching up to them. “We’re still missing Mario, Spike, Gonzales Jr., Ms. Mowz, and Vivi–”

Spike, Gonzales Jr., Ms. Mowz, and Vivian erupted from Goombella's shadow. Vivian held Goombella in a tight embrace, while the others clung to her back. "Goombella! I found you!"

"Run while you talk!" roared Princess Daisy as she scooped up Goombella and Gonzales Jr. then jumped on Koop's back. Ms. Mowz artfully climbed up Daisy's back and rested on the back of her shoulder blades.

As the Koopas launched past the empty door and down the torn remains of World 4-1, Vivian trembled as she clung tight to Goombella's shadow. "...Goombella, I'm sorry…I couldn't save Mario!"

Everyone felt their hearts freeze, even as they all ran for their lives. Goombario broke the silence. "Don't worry. Mario always finds a way!"

Her whiskers flaring, Ms. Mowz pointed to the sky. "There he is!"

They all looked up. A mile above them, a tiny, red speck was flying upwards, to intercept a tiny pink speck as it tumbled down.

…

The force of the tornado carried Mario up higher and higher to meet Peach in mid air. Before, the 500-foot drop had already been lethal. Now, it was almost comically overkill. Mario would have time to recite the entirety of the Lord's Prayer, which his beloved "Mama mia" had taught him to pray every night as a boy, before going splat.

Over his years of adventuring, Mario had learned a thing or two about how to fall from a dizzying height toward certain death, and *not* actually die. In the first place: it was essential to never panic. This was Princess Peach's first mistake, though you can hardly blame her. After all, she had never tried skydiving, at least not willingly.

The human body was not built for flying. While falling, it's easy to begin a death spiral, with no way out. You have to relax, then twist your body against the wind to create drag. Sure, controlling your fall doesn't do much about the sudden stop at the end, but at least it gives you time to think. And as long as you have time to think, you have all the time you need to act.

Before the tornado could carry him to the highest height, Mario leapt off the stone pillar and intercepted Peach in mid air as she fell toward him. They spiraled around one another, holding hands, as Mario counteracted her death spiral. "Peach! I've got you! Just look at me!"

Peach began to regain her equilibrium, and there was Mario, hanging onto her, the only stable thing in her entire world. Tears of relief filled her eyes, falling upwards. "Mario! I knew you'd come!"

Mario reached into shirt, and produced a Red Mushroom. “Princess! Take this! If you eat it…it *will* protect you!”

Mario forced himself to sound more confident than he felt. The power of a red mushroom could grant magical endurance against many a lethal blow, but Mario had never tested one from a fall at this height.

Peach’s hand touched Mario’s as he held out the Mushroom, but she hesitated. “But what about you? How are you going to–”

“I’ll think of something! Just take it! Hurry!”

“No! I know what you’re doing! You promised me you wouldn’t throw your life away!”

“I promised you that I’d never throw my life away, for nothing. And I’m *not* throwing my life away, Princess! Your life isn’t *nothing!* Your life means *everything* to me!”

“It’s not right! You shouldn’t have to die, just so I can go on living! My people *need* you, Mario! *I* need you! I…I…” She tried to say it. Tried to say the word she had thought when Mario first came to her rescue, all those years ago. But it caught in her throat.

“Your people need you more! Don’t you see? You’re a *Princess!* And your life is worth more than mine!”

“I can’t do it! I won’t! You promised me!”

A single tear appeared in Mario’s eye, but his face remained firm. “And you promised me that if I told you to save yourself, and leave me behind, that you’d obey! If you don’t take the power up, then I *will* have died for nothing! …Please, Peach, I want you to live…”

Wordlessly, Peach felt her fingers gripping on the Mushroom. What she would have done next, she never knew. They heard a brash, familiar voice echoing from above, “Peaches! Don’t worry, baby! Daddy’s coming for ya’!”

As they turned to look, Bowser was diving like a falcon to intercept them, propelled by four pillars of pink flame. His very hair seemed to be made of shifting flame, billowing red, then orange, then rose gold. As Bowser snatched Peach around her navel, his velocity carried them down even faster. As Mario and Peach were jostled by the impact, Mario’s hand was knocked away from the mushroom, leaving Peach clutching to the mushroom with one hand.

The entire obstacle course flashed by them in a blur as they rocketed toward the hard ground, before Bowser twisted to face his feet to the ground. They pulled out of the deadly swan dive a few feet above the forest treetops, before rocketing back up, towards the obstacle course. The whiplash nearly tore Mario free from his grip on Peach’s other hand, but she held on just long

enough to give Mario time to wrap around one of Bowser's legs in mid air. His hair flashing from yellow to red, Bowser snarled at Mario as he started to careen off course. "Hey! Cut it out! Do you have any idea how hard it is to fly this thing? Leggo!"

…

At the sight of Mario and Peach falling to their doom, Spike the Lakitu released his grip on Vivian, and flew to the rescue. But Lakitu clouds are built more like rescue helicopters than like hypersonic aircraft. Just as Spike realized Mario and Peach were hopelessly out of reach, he saw Bowser diving down to catch them. Spike skidded to a halt then angled his flight path to intercept as Bowser came rocketing back up toward the obstacle course. Focusing on Bowser, Spike saw that he was flying shakily, and acted on instinct. Spike's plan was to grab Mario and Peach by the hand, then pull them away from Bowser. But just as Spike dove to intercept them, something strange happened. Bowser's hair shimmered and flashed gold, and his/her blue eyes locked on Spike. "Filthy peasants!"

Bowser's flight suddenly grew steady, controlled, and the last thing Spike saw was Bowser lowering his/her blond head, the sharp points of the crown aimed directly at Spike as he/she shot forward on a collision course. It all happened so fast, Spike didn't have a chance to course correct. The crown smashed into Spike and Piff, and as Bowser reared his/her head like a bull, the unconscious Lakitu and his loyal cloud steed were both tossed up and out of the way. Knocked unconscious, Spike and Piff both drifted through the air, almost lazily, before they disappeared into a group of puffy cumulus clouds.

Bowser flashed his/her eyes down at Mario. "How *dare* you lay your hands on a Princess?"

Tightening his/her grip on Princess Peach, Bowser began to pilot in a tight spiral, a perfect aileron roll, trying to shake Mario loose.

…

As Daisy watched Bowser, Peach, and Mario flying back up towards the obstacle course, she remembered something her dad had told her when he taught her to play catch as a little girl: "Keep your eye on the ball, and put your glove where you're looking!"

Daisy took a deep breath. "Toadette, I need you to take Goombella. Junior, can you run?"

Gonzales Jr. grinned, and started pumping his feet to prepare to hit the ground running. "Want to ride on my back?"

Daisy did not take her eye off of Bowser, Peach, and Mario as they rocketed steadily closer. "No. I have a plan."

Daisy carefully tossed Gonzales Jr. to the ground to let him run ahead, then handed a nervous looking Goombella over to a nervous looking Toadette, who was holding a nervous looking Goombario. "What plan?" muttered all three at once.

Without blinking, Daisy unhitched the yellow sash Peach had given her to cover her underpants, and tied it around her shoulders like a superhero cape. “I’m going to catch them.”

Toadette started to yell a warning, but too late. “No! That’s not how a super cape works! It won’t let you–”

Stretching her arms out like Superman, Daisy used Koops’ momentum to leap up and into Bowser’s path, the yellow cape fluttering behind her. Daisy had never used a super cape before, though she’d heard stories of how Mario and Luigi had used one to fly on their many adventures. Unfortunately, as Toadette had attempted to point out, wearing a super cape does not in fact, allow you to fly. Also unfortunately, Daisy couldn’t hear Toadette through the rushing whirlwind. But, very fortunately, as Princess Daisy dove into nothingness, she fully believed, with all her heart, that she *could* fly, so she didn’t panic.

Bowser’s blue eyes went wide as he/she spotted the tomboy princess of Sarasaland appear from nowhere.

Daisy landed a solid downward punch to the crown on Bowser’s head as she intercepted them, then pulled Peach and Bowser into a bear hug as she was carried along with the momentum. “Bowser! You cheat! Unhand my friends!”

It was as if Daisy had just punched the blond color right out of Bowser with one blow. Bowser’s head spiraled, and as he blinked, his eyes blazed red again to match his hair. “...The *hell?”*

His hands shaky, Bowser did a double take as he realized he didn’t know how to fly, and as he plummeted, he slipped loose from Mario and Daisy’s grip, clinging tightly to Princess Peach in his terror. “Yaaargh!”

As Peach called Mario’s name, Daisy spun in mid air and caught Mario. “Up, up, and away!”

But as she turned to fly after Bowser, she finally noticed she wasn’t actually flying at all. She felt the cape fluttering above her as she and Mario started to drop. “Mario? How do you work this thing?”

Mario reached up and snatched the loose ends of the cape, twisting them in his wrists to secure his grip. “Untie it and hold on for dear life!”

As Daisy did it, the cape caught the wind like a parachute, and felt it tugging at both of their arms with a snap. “Ooh! Whiplash!”

Below them, Peach clung tight to Bowser as they fell head-first, her voice surprisingly steady. “Bowser! Start flying, right now!”

Bowser wailed like a little boy with a boo-boo. “I don’t know how!”

“Yes, you do. Now do it!”

Waving his hands, Bowser felt the flames spark to life and held his arms and legs steady, arcing them back up, and away from the obstacle course. “Hey! I’m getting the hang of this…Say, now that I can fly, I’ll just fly us home to the Koopa Kingdom for our honeymoon! I’ve been thinking, Peachy, I’d like us to renew our wedding vows. For this marriage to work, I think we need to work on our communication–”

Peach wrenched at Bowser’s throat, pulling him off course. “Bowser, watch out! You can’t go that way!”

“Agh! What? It’s a wide open sky. Now, shaddup and let me drive, wom–”

Bowser’s face smacked against what felt like a sheet of unbreakable glass. Fortunately, Peach had pulled him off course just enough for it to be a glancing blow. Bowser took most of the brunt of the impact as he squeaked against the invisible wall for a few feet, before the reverberating force bounced him back off it. “Grrargh! What’d I hit?”

“An invisible wall! Listen to me, the Mario Maker creates a self-contained magical world. You can’t just blast your way out of it! Please, come back with us! We’ll get everyone home safe, togeth–”

“Ugh! Really, Peach? You added invisible walls? I hate when they put these things in video games. Makes everything feel like you’re stuck on some sort of railroad plot. Lazy game design if you ask–”

Peach looked Bowser in the eyes. “Bowser! You’ve caused enough trouble for one day! You take me back to the others, right now!”

Bowser’s mouth twitched into a simpering smile. “But Peach, we’re together again! I’ll be your knight in shining armor!”

“I’m not your damsel in distress! I don’t need saving!”

“Oh, c’mon Peach, you definitely needed saving back there!”

“Only because *you* put all of us in danger in the first place!”

“See, everytime I try to make things right, you have to bring up old drama. How many times do we have to have this old argument?”

“We’re having this argument again because *you never listen* to a word I say!”

Bowser sighed as he aimed toward the hidden warp zone above World 4-2. “And here comes the gaslighting.”

As Bowser and Peach flew eastward, Mario grimaced as he realized there was no hope of catching up.

Daisy caught his attention as she twisted around, looking for any way out of their slow descent. The obstacle course was slightly below them, but still well out of reach. “We’re drifting! We need to catch an updraft!”

Madame Flurrie fluttered around them, puffing her cheeks. “Ask, and ye shall receive!”

With a gust of wind, Madame Flurrie gave them a lift, and Mario and Daisy dropped lightly to the course. Daisy fixed the yellow cape around her waist like a sash again, to cover her underpants. “Hey, Mario, thanks for not calling attention to my underpants. You are a true gentleman!”

Toadette, Goombario, Goombella, Gonzales Jr. and Lady Bow called from a distance as they approached. Goombella and Goombario were now Koopa surfing themselves. “Mario! Daisy!”

As Mario turned, Vivian leapt out of Mario’s shadow and embraced him, trembling. “You made it! Goombario was right! You found a way!”

The exhausted Koopas came spinning to a halt. Goombario bounced as he hopped off of Kooper’s back. “Mario! You should have seen it! This Piranha Plant grabbed Toadette, and yanked us all down into a hidden chamber, and Goombella and I had to team up to–”

Goombella interrupted Goombario as she pushed forth. “Goombario! Walk *and* chew bubble gum!”

Goombario nodded as they all started to sprint, “Right, right, right!”

Princess Daisy examined the group, and felt like something was missing. “Where’s Spike?”

Lady Bow shook her head as she floated along beside them. “Señor Spike suffered a nasty blow. I fear for his valiant soul!”

Gonzales Jr. scoffed. “Spike’s a champion. As long as he has Piff with him, he’s safe. He may be down for the count, but never out!”

Goombario looked like he suddenly remembered something important. “Princess Daisy? Where’s Ms. Mowz?”

Daisy tensed. “Huh? She isn’t with you?”

Toadette shook her head. “She was on your back before you jumped.”

“But she *wasn’t* on my back when I jumped. There’s no way I could have missed that. I would have felt her when I put on the cape. Where could she–”

There was a shuddering groan, like a mighty giant scratching his nails against a chalkboard. And with a low, reverberating snap, the entirety of the obstacle course broke loose from the stone staircase. The horizon seemed to tilt as their path rose in front of them, bringing them all to their knees. Mario called the entire group. “Gather together!”

Then, their entire world fell away beneath them, not just a small piece of the floor, like before, but as far as the eye could see. There was no hope of outrunning it. As Mario and Daisy held hands, they started to float away from the falling world. Vivian clung to Mario, but as Mario drew farther and farther away from his shadow, farther away from her, Vivian knew in her heart that she was about to lose him forever. The Mario Maker was dying. It was the end of the world.

[End of Chapter 14]

Bowsette's Princess Lessons
Chapter XV: Through the Valley of the Shadow

[Art by nanaichi_drafting]

[Content warning: This chapter depicts a sequence of emotional and physical abuse.]

Parakarry the Parakoopa carried the unconscious body of Bombette, muttering to himself as he laid her down beside Admiral Bobbery and Luigi. "...Okay, bad news first…can't go through the warp pipe, or I kill–"

He stiffened as a shiver traveled through his broken wing. “–kill my friends. Can’t fly, so I can’t save my friends either…”

He pressed his head close to Luigi’s chest, and heard a rasping, rattling breath. “They’re all breathing, thank God…but can’t risk moving Luigi, without healing him…” Parakarry peeped in his mailbag, knowing he’d find nothing but a few dried shrooms. “And can’t heal him magically…Good news? Let’s see, I guess Bowser retreated, so that gives Mario and the others a chance to–”

Parakarry heard the low, crackling hum of a bonfire, slowly building to the roar of an inferno. Searching the horizon, Parakarry spotted Bowser, coming in for a landing, with Peach squirming in his heavily-muscled, though feminine, arms. “Quit wriggling! I can’t stick the landing if you keep–d’oh!”

As Peach thrust her head back against Bowser’s jaw, they both crashed into the brick pathway above the warp zone, out of Parakarry’s line of sight.

Before he knew what he was doing, Parakarry ducked out of sight behind an orange warp pipe, then cursed himself. “Hide! ...No, what am I doing? I can’t just run and hide, I’ve got to fight him! …But I *can’t* fight him!”

As he glimpsed his friends lying helpless by the wall, Parakarry repeated the words Mario had told him all those years ago: “You are *not* a coward Parakarry. Lie in wait, out of sight…wait for your enemy, then strike!”

Peach kicked as she lay across Bowser’s shoulder, in a furious, though futile, attempt to break free. She discovered that, even though Bowser lacked his true, monstrous bulk, he still had supernatural strength. He must have gotten his hands on a red mushroom, but when? “Bowser, put me down, right this instant!”

Bowser held up a dainty finger. “Nuh uh, I gotta get you out of this death trap of an obstacle course before you get hurt.”

“And what about the others? You’re condemning them to death!”

“Eh, you worry too much. I’ve tossed Mario off a precipice or two in my day, and he never seems to stay dead….More’s the pit–eeeeee!”

Bowser squealed like a little girl as Parakarry dove for his feet. Unable to fly, Parakarry withdrew into his shell and shot forward like a regular Koopa. As Bowser skipped out of the way, the pinkie toe on his bare foot took the brunt of the attack. Bowser stiffened, then hopped on one foot, nursing his stubbed toe. “Gargh!”

As Parakarry bounced off the nearest pipe and ricocheted back for another attack, Bowser growled and readied himself in a crane stance. “No..you..don’t!”

Bowser delivered a one-legged jump kick, knocking out Parakarry mid-charge. It was just like that one scene in Bowser’s favorite movie: *The Karate Kid*, from which Bowser had learned many valuable life lessons about how to ruthlessly bully nerds with your superior fighting style.

Peach gasped as she saw Parakarry bounce lifelessly off the stone wall, then pummelled Bowser’s back with her balled fists. “No! …Ooh, shame, shame, *shame* on you, Bowser!”

“Whaddaya want? He attacked me! Look, I’m doing this for your own good, Peachie Pie! It’s tough love!” Bowser felt a strange, maternal urge to spank the Princess’s upturned bottom, but resisted the impulse. Now that they were together again, he couldn’t bear to think of his precious Peach in pain!

As Peach flailed uselessly, she felt something clenched tight in her fist, and noticed she still had the red mushroom from before…the one Mario had offered her to save her life. If she ate it, she could gain super strength. She could fight Bowser! Or could she?

Once, years ago, Bowser had kidnapped Mario and Luigi, after coming to the conclusion that, with the Super Mario Bros safely out of the way, it would be a simple matter to kidnap Peach later, at his convenience. Instead, Peach had set out on a delightful adventure of her own, with her trusty companion Perry the Parasol, who doubled as a weapon of opportunity. Back then, Peach had triumphed over Bowser…Why not fight Bowser again, right now?

Bowser leapt up onto the orange warp pipe, and hopped to dive in, feet first. Peach knew it was now or never…

But as she caught sight of her friends, Luigi, Bombette, and Admiral Bobbery, lying smashed and broken on the ground, and Parakarry just shy of losing consciousness, Peach made her decision. “Parakarry! Take my mushroom!”

Parakarry groaned as he sat up, a crack in one of the glasses of his aviator cap, then caught the red mushroom, just as Bowser began to disappear down the warp pipe.

With a “WHUMP!” Bowser’s curvy buttocks stuck fast in the pipe. “Oh, by the Ox King’s fat, horny head! This had better not become a running gag!”

Holding the struggling Peach high above his head, Bowser twisted his hips, and with a “Pop!” he shot down the orange warp pipe, Peach crying as she was carried along with him.

His vision blurring, Parakarry examined the single mushroom, then looked at each of his friends, trying to guess how close each of them were to death. “It…will have to do…” Parakarry reached into his satchel and produced his emergency letter opener, then began to cut the red mushroom

into four, uneven pieces. He was so exhausted, he had to eat the smallest piece himself, before crawling to Bombette, gently cradling her head/body in his arms, and feeding her the second piece. Parakarry felt a shiver as Bombette began to breathe softly. Sighing with relief, Parakarry held up Admiral Bobbery's head, and fed him the second piece. Princess Peach had saved their lives...for now.

Parakarry heard a rumble, and as a tornado ripped through the brick wall that enclosed the warp zone, Parakarry could see the entirety of World 4-1, crumbling and falling away, the very stones shattering on the ground far below.

…

As Vivian tightened her grip on the strap of Mario's overalls, she felt the shadow beneath her, calling to her. Above her, Vivian saw Mario holding with both hands onto one of Daisy's hands. In her other hand, she held Gonzales Jr. and behind him, their entire group of friends was connected in one long chain as they all tumbled toward certain death: Toadette, Goombario, Goombella, Kooper, Koops, Koopie-Koo, Lady Bow, and Madame Flurrie.

Vivian wondered if Ms. Mowz was already lost forever, and made her decision. In the face of certain death, she would risk passing through the shadow. "Mario! …Think of Luigi!"

As Mario turned to look at Vivian, he saw their own shadow below them, growing larger, expanding like the maw of a great beast to swallow them whole.

As the sky above them began to disappear, Gonzales Jr. whispered, his small voice echoing like thunder in the blackness. "No! N-not again! Not the dark–"

And then there was only darkness.

Mario tensed. He'd never known Gonzales Jr. to show fear. Mario had hidden in his shadow with Vivian before, but there was something different now…it all felt…larger. Mario tried to call out to Gonzales Jr., then Daisy, and heard nothing. As he felt a sinking feeling deep in his stomach, Mario had a strange sense that the blackness wasn't simply the absence of light. There was something solid about this darkness.

Then Mario felt two arms wrap around his chest from behind,and heard Vivian's voice in his mind. "Everyone! Don't try to speak! Just think of Luigi! No matter what happens, remember Luigi."

Mario felt himself being dragged, and somehow, even though he could see nothing but blackness in every direction, he felt that there was no longer one great shadow, but thousands upon thousands of tiny shadows, all spiraling around him. And then, Mario finally understood: before now, Vivian had only ever hid him within his own shadow. But this was not just his shadow anymore.

And then, even as he felt Daisy's hand in his, his vision became distorted. It was as if Daisy and all his friends were falling farther and farther away from him…no, it was as if they were shrinking, while he was shrinking himself. But that couldn't be! He could feel Daisy's hands clutching his own, even as he saw her shrink into nothingness…

"We're almost there! Think of Luigi!" cried Vivian.

Mario closed his eyes, which made no difference in the blackness, but somehow helped him concentrate on his own hands. Daisy was here! His friends were here. And they were all going to see Luigi again.

Luigi's silhouette appeared in Mario's mind. All at once, he remembered every moment he had spent with Luigi in Little Italy, the walks back home to the apartment complex in Brooklyn.

Then, Luigi's image shattered within his mind, and Mario felt something crack deep within his own chest.

…

In a dream, Luigi felt Bowser's heel digging into his chest. He couldn't stop Bowser. He had failed Mario. He had failed Daisy. Hazily, Luigi could make out Parakarry's voice calling to him from far away, before Luigi slipped into a dreamless coma.

…

Vivian screamed. "No! What happened? Why is his shadow fading?"

Mario felt Daisy's hand gripping tighter to his.

And then, Mario heard a familiar voice in the shadow. But it was not Vivian's. It was the voice of a very old woman, old, but not frail, calling his name. "Maaariooo…"

A candle flame appeared, and Mario saw Vivian, towering over him like a monument in the infinite void. "Stay back, demon! Your reign has ended!"

The second voice took a slow, shuddering breath. "...Vivian…"

There was a ripple in the blackness, as if a curtain was being drawn across a silent waterfall of ink, and the Shadow Queen emerged, towering over Vivian. "...Did you think that if you brought me Mario, that I would lessen your punishment?"

Vivian twisted her hand, and her flame expanded, like a bud blooming into a flower. "I am not your slave any more, demon! Mario has shown me another way! A better way!"

The Shadow Queen's silvery hair began to billow like ribbons, catching the light from Vivian's flame. "And when a thousand years have passed…will Mario still be there, to save you from my wrath?"

Vivian's flame stuttered, then rekindled, more weakly.

The Shadow Queen pressed closer, her small, graceful lips parting in a smile, which grew wider, and wider. "Give him to me, child. I will still punish you for your disobedience. I *must* punish you. But if you give him to me, I will forget your treason."

Vivian shook her head, her fingers shivering as she concentrated on strengthening the flame. "I will never betray him!"

As the Shadow Queen rocked her head back in a fit of silent laughter, her jaw seemed to unhinge, her pointed teeth like mountains. "Oh, foolish child…you already have betrayed him!"

Vivian's flame was snuffed out, and where she once felt Mario in her grip, there was nothing.

Vivian fumbled in the darkness, shivering as she felt a sudden icy cold.

Her eldest sister, Beldam appeared before her, scowling. "Vivian! There you are, you maladjusted wart. That's *two* rounds of punishment you've earned today!"

"P-punishment? What did I–"

Beldam waved a finger, and a gust of icy wind smashed against Vivian's chest, flecks of ice cutting into her. Vivian screamed, and shielded her face. "What did I do, Beldam? What did I do?"

Beldam snarled as she aimed the next blast of sleet pelting against Vivian's face and flailing arms, "Don't act innocent. You know *exactly* what you did!"

Vivian scootched away from Beldam, crawling on her back. None of this made sense. "I swear I dunno! Please, don't hurt me, Beldam!"

Beldam spasmed, affecting a whiny voice. "I dunno, I dunno! Always, I dunno, with you! I know you're an airhead, but not even you could forget an order that quickly, when you know you've already got a punishment coming. It's pure stubbornness!"

There was a crackle of electricity, and Vivian's second elder sister, Marilyn, appeared in the darkness, looking lost. "Guh?"

Vivian screamed as she twisted to crawl on her hands and knees toward Marilyn. "Marilyn? Help me! Please, help!"

Beldam's next attack slashed across Vivian's lower back with such force, Vivian's face crashed against the shadowy "floor" with a bump. As Vivian wailed in agony, Marilyn reached out a hand, as if wanting to help her up, but unsure if she should. "Buh…buh…"

Beldam pointed a finger at Marilyn's face. "Butt out! You're my favorite baby sister, but not by that much."

As Vivian curled into a fetal position, she saw Marilyn glance at her once, then back away slowly.

Beldam rounded on Vivian and gripped her by the arm. With a flurry of frost, a thin sheet of ice formed around Beldam's fist, slowly traveling up Vivian's arm. "Let's assume you actually are as brainless as you pretend to be, when you think it will get you out of some much-needed punishment. First, you let Mario escape, making us look like incompetent fools in front of that pompous glass-head, Grodus. Then, after I slave away to magic up a Superbobbomb, so we can just incinerate Mario in a 100-kiloton blast and be done with it, you go and drop it!"

As Vivian pulled uselessly, and felt the icy cold pricking into her arm like a thousand tiny needles, she suddenly remembered.

Of course, she was Vivian, the Shadow Siren. At least, she was the stupid, plug-ugly member of the Shadow Sirens. And she remembered that it was her job to kill Mario. And once they killed Mario, the Shadow Queen would return, and everything would be as it was again. Beldam wouldn't have to hurt her anymore! "But…I never had the Superbobomb! You said I couldn't be trusted to–"

As Beldam tightened her grip, the ice spread to encase Vivian's arm and shoulder. "And, clearly, you can't be trusted! Or you wouldn't have lost it in the first place! And then, I generously give you time to look for it, to make a tiny effort to correct your own bungling, and what do you do?"

"–I, I looked hard! We finally found it, but–"

Beldam twisted her wrist, and icicles dug into Vivian's arm like daggers. "But you broke it! And then, rather than own up to your own incompetence, you threw it away and ran! That's what hurt me the most, Vivian. You think I'm so stupid, that I'll just forget to punish you, if you hide from me long enough? Oh, no, no, no, naughty little boy! The shadow does not forget!"

Beldam "seated" herself in midair, then yanked Vivian across her lap. As Beldam raised her free hand high, a circle of magic appeared on her palm, forming into the shape of a snowflake. "And the shadow does not forgive!"

As Beldam brought the first spank down across Vivian's bottom, the cold magically numbed the pain, even as that very same pain washed through Vivian. Vivian had been spanked by Beldam

plenty of times before, but this felt less like the sting of ordinary spanking, and more like a solid punch. Vivian wanted to scream, but she was too frightened to catch her breath.

As she felt the icy blows pummeling into her, Vivian had a strange, rational thought. The ice was numbing the sting, but that same ice would kill her soon, if Beldam didn't stop. And Vivan remembered something that could save her life. "Mario! When I lost–"

Beldam carried on delivering the beating, every stroke leaving a thicker coat of snow and ice across Vivian's defenseless back. "Yes, yes, Mario! Thanks to you, Mario has slipped through our fingers, yet again! So that's *another* punishment, once we're done with the first two. Hold, on, is it three? One punishment for losing the superbobomb, two for breaking it…ah yes, three for running away. And now, four punishments! Your fourth punishment is for losing–"

Vivian tried to flail her arms, only to find her arm frozen solid inside Beldam's grip. "I know where Mario is!"

Beldam's hand froze in midair. "You're lying! Just trying to weasel your way out of the spanking you have coming. Typical! Last chance to tell the truth, or it's *five* punishments!"

As Vivian shook her head, she felt the ice reach her throat. "Not lying! I can take you to him!"

Beldam didn't let Vivian up, but she didn't hit Vivian either. "How did you? …Where? Where is Mario?"

"He…he saw me crying and came to help me and–"

Beldam cut Vivian off with another spank. "I don't want to hear the complete and unabridged story! The only thing that matters is–wait, you said he tried to help you? That's ridiculous! He'd have attacked you on sight…And even if he didn't attack you on sight, why didn't you attack *him* on sight? You could have captured him!"

The ice started to encase Vivian's chest. "I didn't recognize him! He didn't look like–"

Beldam spanked Vivian again, shattering the ice that covered her bottom, before it magically reformed, thicker than before. "Sure you didn't! Probably just another short, fat, ruggedly handsome man with a magnificent mustache wearing a bright red hat you bumped into, while he was out for a stroll. This lie is getting more and more pathetic, little boy."

Vivian felt her tears freezing against her face as the ice closed in tightly around her, about to cover her mouth. "It was some kind of strange magic! Someone stole his name and face!"

Beldam raised her hand to continue the beating. "Stole his name? Don't be absurd! That–"

Beldam froze, and stood up, letting Vivian drop to the ground. “–That’s ancient shadow magic. You’re not supposed to know anything about that! How did you find out about the Nameless Magic, you little rodent? Answer me!”

As Vivian shivered in a crumpled heap, she felt the ice start to magically dissipate, without melting, and coughed. “My friend…the guy who stole his name and face…He *had* Mario’s name and face. The fake Mario had all of Mario’s friends following him around, calling him Mario. So that means the guy with no face is the real Mario! He has to be!”

Beldam screamed, and pummeled her own head. “Agh! Another mix-up? This is your blunder with the wanted poster all over again! But that means—”

Tears appeared in Vivian’s eyes as she hung her head. Of course, she was the one who had screwed it all up. She wasn’t sure how, but somehow, there was always some sort of foul up, and it was always her fault. That was how it always had been. There were the two beautiful Shadow Sisters…and the other one, the weakest one…the one who looked like an ugly boy.

Beldam clutched Vivian by both her shoulders to lift her up, face-to-face. “That means Mario is all alone! This is our chance! Marilyn, get over here!”

Marilyn stumbled out of the shadows, where she had been cowering. “Guh!”

Beldam stroked Vivian’s hair. “Oh, Vivian, my sweet, this fixes everything! Once we kill Mario, we’ll finally be safe!”

Vivian felt her head spinning as a fresh chill traveled up her spine. “K-kill Mario? But Grodus said he wanted Mario alive for question–”

Beldam snarled, before pulling Vivian into a tighter hug, gentler than she had ever held Vivian before. “Forget Grodus! We’re taking no chances. Once Mario is dead, that bowl-headed freak will happily collect the rest of the Crystal Stars, and once he opens the Thousand Year Door…Oh, Vivian, we can finally see Mother again!”

Vivian couldn’t move. “But…we don’t have to kill Mario to save Mother! We could just–”

Beldam’s embrace tightened. “Vivian! Take us to Mario. Now.”

Vivian knew that if she said yes, if she just gave up Mario, the pain would stop. Vivian wanted to say yes. “No. I won’t help you kill him. It’s…this is wrong.”

A howling, icy wind thrust Vivian flying back onto her back. Beldam screeched, charging two circles of ice magic in each of her hands. “Were you just born wrong? Did Mother give you life, only to test my patience? Just show me his shadow, and I’ll kill him myself. Not like I can count on you in a fight, any–”

Vivian rose and blasted fire at Beldam first. Beldam's ice magic just managed to dissipate Vivian's fire. Marilyn grunted in terror as she watched from the sidelines. "Guh!"

With a banshee scream, Beldam raised a finger, summoning an arctic storm. "You wicked child! How dare you raise a hand against me!"

Vivian gasped for air. "Stop!"

Beldam pointed her finger, and the cold wind encompassed Vivian. She felt herself being encased in ice, like fingers reaching at her from all sides. Vivian knew that this was the end. In all her life, she had never once known what it meant to be safe…until the day she met Mario.

Vivian's flame engulfed her body, and as she pointed her finger at Beldam, she caught a glimpse of Beldam's sadistic grin, before Vivian's fire engulfed Beldam too. "Aie-yeeeek! It burns!"

Her whole body singed to a sooty black, Beldam wobbled, before collapsing onto her face, the tip of her witch hat on fire. "...Ow."

Vivian used both her hands to hold up two small candle flames, one pointed at each of her sisters. "Enough! I'm going back to Mario. Don't try to stop me, Beldam! And do *not* follow me, or else…or else I will stop you."

Pointing a shaky finger at Vivian, Beldam looked to Marilyn in desperation. "Don't let her escape!"

Marilyn held up her hands in surrender, looking back and forth at her two sisters. "Guh?"

Vivian felt tears returning to her eyes. "Marilyn? You don't have to stay with Beldam. Come with me. We can both be free!"

With a final growl, Beldam collapsed. "...No…we'll never be free! Don't you see, Vivian? Mother is coming home soon! And if I don't do a good job…she'll punish us!"

Vivian rounded on Beldam, her flame sparking. "I don't care if she kills me!"

Beldam chuckled weakly. "Mother *won't* kill you, Vivian. Mother will *never* kill you...Marilyn, if you betray Mother now, she'll *punish* you, forever and ever. You don't want that, do you?"

Marilyn looked back and forth from Beldam to Vivian, her face desperate. Finally, Marilyn shook her head. Still holding her hands up, Marilyn slowly glided to join Beldam. Beldam whimpered, her anger disappearing as her voice cracked with sorrow. "Don't do it, Vivian! Would you betray your family, for this stranger?

Vivian fought back tears as she opened a path through the shadow behind her. “I'm... I'm sorry, Sis...This Mario is the only person who's ever been kind to me…”

Vivian whisked through the shadows, looking for Mario. And she remembered. She remembered the first time she had betrayed Mario, leaving him to his death. She remembered finding Mario’s shadow again, the shadow where she most needed to be. She remembered seeing Mario fighting with his last breath as his imposter beat him mercilessly. She remembered the words she’d whispered in Mario’s ear as she reappeared in his shadow. “Mario! I'm fighting by your side from now on! I've... I've made my choice! And I'm not turning back!”

And as she remembered, Vivian saw through the Shadow Queen’s illusion: a conjured memory of her darkest hour. But the Shadow Queen had made a grave error. Because the darkest day in Vivian’s life was also the day she stepped out of the darkness, and into the light.

Fully awake, Vivian conjured a pillar of flame that threw the shadow world into vivid light. “I know your ticks, demon! You have *already* been defeated. You are *nothing!”*

The Shadow Queen howled and retreated, deeper into her empty cavern, into the greater nothingness within the infinite void.

Vivian saw Mario, Daisy, and all her friends, alive, but falling away from her, shrinking smaller and smaller, and gently caught them in her other hand. As the light filled the infinite darkness, sound returned, and she could hear their voices. Daisy’s was the first voice they all heard as she roared, “Luigi!”

And then, a shadow stretched across the sky above them, in the exact shape of Luigi, and they heard the sound of a heartbeat. As Vivian arose with her friends in hand, reality started to correct itself. Her friends seemed to grow to their proper size, until they were all their true selves again.

“Vivian!” Below them, the Shadow Queen, who had once seemed to loom so large above them, began to shrink to the size of a mouse cowering within her hole, then to the size of an ant. When there was nothing more, they all heard a final whisper. “...I’ll see you in a thousand years….”

…

As flying debris smashed through the brick wall above them, Parakarry held the last slice of the red mushroom against Luigi’s lips, struggling to get it past his clenched teeth. “Luigi, can you hear me? You’ve got to take a bite, Luigi. The mushroom can’t heal you if you don’t–”

Luigi coughed, then started lifting his head. Parakarry caught his head from behind. “Don’t get up! Just a small nibble!”

Luigi bit down on the mushroom and swallowed, then his eyes popped awake and he leapt to his feet, unsteadily. In a daze, Luigi turned to look around, and saw only his shadow on the wall behind him. “Daisy! Mario! Parakarry? Where is every–”

Everyone flew out of Luigi’s shadow, crashing into him to land in a giant dog pile. Daisy landed on top of Luigi. The force of the impact sent their faces crashing against each other with such force, their teeth clicked against one another. Pulling her lips away from Luigi, Daisy howled and held her throbbing teeth. “Aag! Luigi!”

Luigi gurgled. “D-Daisy?”

Mario struggled to extricate himself from the dogpile. “Luigi?”

Daisy sat up with such force, she accidentally bench pressed the combined weight of all her friends, cradling Luigi’s head on her lap. “Luigi! You did it! I don’t know you did, but whatever you did, you did it! You stopped Bowser! And you did it all by yourself!”

Daisy kissed Luigi full on the lips. Then, she looked up, and spotted Parakarry, Bombette, and Admiral Bobbery. “And you! You all helped Luigi stop Bowser, all by himself! Oh, I could kiss you all!”

But before Daisy could hand out more kisses, the tornado ripped through the wall opposite them. Mario stood and pointed toward the orange Warp Pipe that led to the final World of the obstacle course. “Everyone through the Warp Pipe! I’ll follow you! Go!”

As Goombario and Goombella led the others through the orange warp pipe, Luigi’s eyes fluttered closed as he began to drift back into unconsciousness. “Mario…the Crown…Bowser is…stronger now…the Crown!”

Daisy cradled Luigi in both arms, letting his head slump limply against her shoulder as she dove down the warp pipe. As Mario brought up the rear, he saw the rest of World 4-2 crumble and collapse beneath them, and hopped down the pipe after Daisy.

If you’re curious what it feels like to be magically teleported via warp pipe, it’s exactly like going down a waterslide while watching a double rainbow, except instead of feeling cold and wet, you feel warm and toasty all over. While getting in and out of a Warp Pipe can be a little tricky, once you’re in, the pipe seems to expand around you, becoming less claustrophobic. This meant Mario could easily hear Daisy as she called up to him from further down the pipe. “Mario! I dunno’ about you, but this is the roughest fight I’ve had since we took down Tatanga. I’m getting Luigi out of here! But if I’m focused on protecting Luigi, I’ll need you to take point on kicking Bowser’s butt! That cool?”

Mario nodded.

Daisy fixed Mario with a stern look. “You sure? I know you’re big on that ‘Boys don’t hit girls’ chivalry stuff. Is that going to be a problem, with Bowser looking all girly now? If you want, I can pummel Bowser for ya’!”

Mario shook his head. “Don’t worry, Daisy. When I get my hands on Bowser…*he*…is going down.”

[End of Chapter XV]

Bowsette's Princess Lessons
Chapter XVI: Of Mice and Turtle Men and/or Women

Bowser shot out the end of the warp pipe, holding Peach above his head as they skidded along the ground like a hockey puck. Bowser's feminine buttocks took most of the friction for him. "Agh! I really should have installed mattresses at the end of those things."

Peach kicked as Bowser pinned her under his arm, tucking her tight against his waist. "Bowser, it's not too late! We can talk about the conditions of your release, but only if you stop this madness!"

Bowser stood up and dusted off the torn remains of his ratty ballroom gown. "Oh, so *now* you want to bargain? That's good! Bargaining is the last step before acceptance. My date coach told me that before I had him thrown in the dungeon."

In a single motion, Bowser momentarily released his grip on Peach, only to hold his captive up to examine her face-to-face. "...Thank badness! You're not hurt!"

Peach shook her head, her eyes watery. "Please, don't do this! If you'd only–"

But Bowser only tossed her over his shoulder. "Ups-a-Daisy! …Hmm, why do people say 'Ups-a-Daisy'? 'Ups-a-Peachy' sounds a lot cuter."

Peach saw pink flames engulf Bowser's feet, then felt her stomach sink as they both rocketed high into the air. Bowser started to veer wildly. "Crud, crud, crud! Need both hands! Hold tight, sweetie!"

Peach felt their momentum stagger, before Bowser pulled her off his shoulder and into a tight embrace. As Peach twisted her neck, she saw a floating pillar of brick about to smash into them, screamed, and clutched tight to Bowser. With both hands free, Bowser pulled out of the swan dive and started to pilot with the pink flames. Peach was relieved to no longer be careening toward certain death, but the turbulence was still worse than any airplane she'd ever ridden.

Bowser spun his feet forward in mid air to slow down their descent. "Just gotta stick the land–"

The billowing flag slapped against Bowser's face just as he came in for a landing. His knees took most of the brunt of the fall, before he hugged Peach and spun onto his shell to shield her. The spikes on his turtle shell dug deep into the brick, bringing them to a halt.

The Mario Maker's voice rumbled. "W-w-world 8-1 complete! World 8-2…loading…loading…loading…loaded!"

Bowser groaned, and flashed a winning grin at Peach. With his new, feminine face, it would have been a perfectly charming smile, but for his two missing teeth. “Welp, any landing you can walk away from! Am I right?”

Peach shook her head, snarling. “No! You are not right! Why can’t you–”

Bowser dumped Peach over his shoulder again. “Shush! …Peachy, Popsicle, I love you to pieces, but you gotta’ let me concentrate. Once I get you safely home–”

“I will not not be *shushed!* This is an act of war upon my–”

Bowser snorted a puff of black smoke. “Princess, if you don’t cut it out, I’ll…uh…give you a spanking!”

Peach froze, then her voice turned icy. “...You wouldn’t dare.”

Bowser kicked down the double-door entrance to the stone fortress off its hinges. “...You wanna’ test that theory, sweet-cheeks?”

“You have never once struck me. Yes, you’ve laid hands on me. You’ve carried me off to your fortresses, you’ve locked me up, you’ve magically trapped me inside a stained glass window, but you have *never once* hit me.”

Staring at Peach’s short-clad backside as she lay sprawled over his shoulder, Bowser swallowed a lump in his throat. “First time for everything!”

“And is that how your Mother raised you to treat a lady?”

Bowser raised a hand, but hesitated. “...Hey! My Mama is a Saint! A little too kissy-kissy in public, but still–”

“And what would your Mother say, if she could see how you’re acting, right now?”

“Oh, that’s easy, she’d say, ‘Oh, Bowzee, Koopums, I know one day, a handsome boy like you will make a fine husband, once you find the right gal. I can’t wait to spoil more grandchildren! But remember, deep down, all girls want a bad-boy, caveman-type. So just be assertive, and don’t let yourself be pushed around!”

Peach was stunned. She’d met Mrs. Koopa briefly at one of Bowser’s many elaborate wedding ceremonies, and Bowser’s imitation of her accent was spot on. Then she felt her fanny pack shivering. Peach’s eyes went wide as she spotted a mouse poke its head out of her bag, and she willed herself not to scream.

Then she noticed it was wearing a red domino mask. It was Ms. Mowz! The masked mouse thief held a tiny finger against her lips, and winked at Peach.

Little had Daisy known it, but Ms. Mowz had leapt off of Daisy's shoulder and hitched a ride on her yellow cape. When Daisy had crashed into Bowser in mid-air, Ms. Mowz had seized her chance and crawled into Peach's fanny pack to hide.

As Bowser kicked down the door at the opposite end of the fortress, he paused, stroking his chin. "...Oh, yeah, but she also said that a real man should never hit a woman, barring mutual, ceremonial combat…Sorry about the spanking threat, Peach, it just sorta…slipped out? Guess I got a bit heated."

Peach nodded as Ms. Mowz lightly crawled out of her fanny pack, scampered across Peach, and tucked herself snugly into the folds of Bowser's bustle, right below his turtle shell and spiked tail. "Apology accepted, Bowser. Now, why don't you set me down so we can discuss this like two rational–"

With a blast of pink flame, Bowser shot into the sky again, skipping past the entirety of World 8-2 in a single bound.

…

Goombario counted everyone as they came out of the warp pipe. "That's Goombella, Kooper, Koops, Koopie-Koo, Bombette, Admiral Bobbery, Parakarry and Lady Bow, Madame Flurrie, The Great Gonzales Jr., and Vivian…"

Daisy slid out of the pipe, carrying Luigi in her arms. "Hoof it!"

Lady Bow floated above the group, fanning herself as the group began to sprint. "Poor Spike is still down for the count, lil' Watt flew away in the tornado, and Mrs. Sushie stayed behind at the castle moat."

Gonzales Jr. tugged on his mohawk. "Man, how did Mario ever keep track of all of us?"

Mario shot out of the pipe, rolled once, and sprinted to catch up with the group. "Has anyone seen Ms. Mowz?"

Madame Flurrie held a hand to her forehead as she blew alongside the. "Alas for our valiant rogue! I fear she has taken her final bow upon the great stage!"

Vivian trembled, flitting in and out of the others' shadows. "If only I could have seen her, before I took us through the shadows."

Goombella shook her head. “Don’t count her out yet! She’s flirted with death before, only to escape by a whisker.

Admiral Bobbery puffed his mustache. “Aye! Steel your rudders, mates! If there was any way out of that death trap, she’s sure to have sniffed it out!”

Bombette lit her fuse as they spotted enemies ahead. A thick-shelled Buzzy Beetle stomped toward Bombette, its red eyes flashing. “Then let’s cut a path through these mooks!”

With a blast, Bombette easily knocked aside the Buzzy Beetle, then rolled like a cannonball through a line of the Red Spinies that had replaced Goombas on the obstacle course.

As Mario’s sprint took him to the front of the group, he spoke with command. “Goombas, knock out flying enemies. Koopas, cut a path through the Spinies. Bob-ombs, concentrate on taking out heavily armored enemies. Look out for Bullet Bills! Parakarry, fly high and catch anyone who falls. Madame Flurrie, back up Parakarry, and blast aside enemies with your Gale Force breath. Lady Bow, Vivian, use your power to save anyone who’s about to take a lethal hit! Toadette, Junior, help me get the Koopas over the high obstacles. Once we have a clear shot, we’re all Koopa surfing to catch up with Bowser!”

Goombario’s hat nearly flew off as he hopped alongside Mario. “If Bowser’s already figured out how to fly, that means he has tight control over his new fire power. He’ll be able to strike like a hawk!”

Parakarry dove to take out a Piranha plant. “It’s worse than that! I caught a glimpse of him flying. He was shaky, but with that power, he could fly faster than either I or Spike ever could!”

Mario pulled to the front of the pack, kicking aside an enemy Koopa. “We’ll worry about that later. Everyone, stay focused. We’ll beat him the same way we beat him before…together!”

The entire group naturally fall into a flying V-formation behind Mario, Daisy bringing up the rear to protect Luigi. Their voices all rose as one. “Together!”

…

Bowser snatched the flag at the end of World 8-2, and this time managed to land on his feet, with Peach clinging to him for dear life.

“World 8-2 Complete…World 8-3 Loading…Loaded!”

As she listened to the Mario Maker quickly load the next level, Peach sighed with relief. Now that it was no longer trying to load multiple levels at once, some of the strain had been taken off of the Mario Maker’s overclocked CPU. But in the distance, she could still see the last fortress glitching and dissipating.

A soft tremor rumbled through the ground.

Bowser's knees shook, but he held his legs steady. "Heh, I'm getting the hang of this. Who knew that being a natural pilot was among my many, gifted talents!"

Securing his hold on Peach, Bowser jabbed at the door of the fortress, and to his delight, a pink fireball flew out of his fist, bouncing like a tennis ball. When the ball of fire smashed against the doors, it left behind a scorched, smoking hole in the wood, but the doors held firm. "Huh, not as devastating as my sweet, red-hot cinnamon breath."

Peach spotted a small bump as Ms. Mowz crawled around under the skirt of Bowser's dress. The moment Bowser absent-mindedly reached to scratch his rear end, Ms. Mowz vanished again. "Ugh, my butt itches. Peach, would you be a peach and scratch it for me?"

"Absolutely not."

Bowser punched the door down, using his fire to add a little extra umph to the blow, then flexed his fingers. "Suit yourself."

Spotting the door on the opposite end of the small fortress, Bowser blasted another pink fireball. This time, it ripped clean through the door. Still not up to Bowser's standards for heavy artillery firepower, but an improvement. Bowser kicked aside the tattered remnants of the door. "You know Peach, we could really benefit from some marriage counseling. Our wedding anniversary is coming up, after all."

"For the last time, I was under hypnosis. And not just any hypnosis. Nastasia had to use her dark, magical *super* hypnosis to force me say 'I do.'"

"And those were the two sweetest words I've ever heard you say to me!"

Before Peach could argue the legality of marriage vows given under duress, Bowser blasted into the air again. Below them, Peach could make out a long line of Hammerhead Bros., one of Bowser's most elite units. Why, oh why, had she insisted on making the Mario Maker obstacle course so realistic?

Bowser spotted the Hammerhead Bros. below. "Ooh, that gives me an idea. Quick pit-stop!"

Two Hammerhead Bros. bounced up and down, throwing hammers according to their pre-programmed movements. "Halt, in the name of Lord Koopa! Halt, in the name of Lord Koopa!"

Bowser punched the first Hammerhead Bro so hard, he went flying backwards to crash into his brother. Both the enemies glitched, then disappeared in a pixelated cloud.

Deftly, Bowser caught two hammers in one hand. “Dang! Once you’ve had five fingers, you never want to go back!”

As Bowser reached behind his back to tuck the hammers away into his shell, Peach spotted Ms. Mowz scurrying down and around Bowser’s behind again. “Ack! There’s that bloody itch again…”

Bowser scratched his butt with the tail end of the hammer, then flicked open a compartment on the back of his shell to store the hammers for later. Then he strolled casually toward the floating stones that formed the final obstacle before the flag goalpost. “...But I’d never want to give up my shell. You can store all sorts of things in them. Like magic hammers, for example. Never know when you’re gonna need a good magic hammer to bash in a few–”

With a growl, Bowser scratched his hip, then his stomach. “Ghwarr! What is this, a *traveling* itch? Feels like something crawling all over my–”

Scratching furiously, Bowser grasped one of his own breasts, and heard a small squeak, like a dog’s chew toy. Glancing down, Bowser squeezed his boob twice, and heard the same sound, only it somehow sounded more…desperate?

A mouse poked her head up from between Bowser’s two melon-sized boobs. “Gasp! Unhand me, you cad!”

Bowser’s hair turned bright, golden blond, and he/she leapt up on a stone pillar, hiking his/her skirt up with his/her one free hand. “Eeeeek! It’s a mouse!”

Ms. Mowz tumbled free from Bowser’s breasts, landing gracefully. “Not just any mouse…You face none other than the infamous Ms. Mowz, master thief!”

Bowser bared his fangs, his/her blond hair standing on end. “Master pervert, more like! Keep your paws to yourself!”

Ms. Mowz’s whiskers stiffened. “Feh! You were the one who grasped my…tail…so roughly! Usually, you’re supposed to ask a girl out first, treat her to a little wine and cheese, share a lovely stroll in the park, really get know one another–”

“Look out!” screamed Peach, as she sensed a surge of prickling heat.

Ms. Mows darted out of the way as a thin bullet of pink flame ripped through the stone where she had been standing. Bowser clicked his/her tongue to ignite a second flame. “Sorry, but I’m a married man!”

But before Bowser could incinerate Ms. Mowz, she disappeared. As Bowser spotted the rodent crawling along his/her bare feet, he/she screamed and hopped back onto the ground, dancing away with a look of disgust. “Gaagh! Don’t do that! Who knows where you’ve been?”

Bowser reached back to retrieve the magic hammer from his/her shell, only to notice them missing. “Huh? Where’s my hammers? …Where’s my wallet?”

Bowser glanced up to find Ms. Mowz casually thumbing through a wad of Koopa Kingdom dollar bills. “My, my, that’s quite a lot of cash to carry around. Could it be that you’re compensating for something?”

Bowser snarled and dove for the pickpocket, only for Ms. Mowz to lightly jump onto his/her head and scamper up and over the crown.

Bowser spun wildly, flailing his/her arm. “Argh! Stop it, stop it, staaaahp iiiiiittt!”

Ms. Mowz shielded her ears. “Now, darling, if you want a second date, you should know it’s rather unattractive to scream like a little girl.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Peach saw Bowser’s hair flash from golden blond to blood red. “Ms. Mowz! Run!”

With a roar, Bowser shot a blast of bright red fire from his throat, his good, old fashioned flame-thrower-style dragon breath. Ms. Mowz barely rolled out of range, clutching the hammers and wallet tight. With a low, guttural growl, Bowser charged after Ms. Mowz, charging up a red fireball in his free hand. “Give ‘em back!”

Ms. Mowz halted as the fireball crashed down ahead of her to cut it off, then she doubled back to grab at Bowser’s ankle. “Boo!”

Bowser kicked Ms. Mowz like a football.

Ms. Mowz bounced once, then lay on the ground, clutching her foot paw.

Smoke billowed from Bowser’s nostrils as he scooped up the two magic hammers. “You think I’m scared of you, little mouse?”

Ms. Mowz lifted herself onto her shaky arms. “...You were pretty scared of me a second ago!”

As she felt the tell-tale heat that warned her another blast of fire was coming, Peach tugged sharply on Bowser’s hair. “No!”

Bowser roared with pain, and blasted his red flames into the sky. “Yow! Quit tugging!”

“Please, don’t hurt her! She’s no threat to you!”

Bowser pulled his red hair free, then whipped it around his head to get it out of Peach’s reach. “She’s attacking me? What am I supposed to do, turn the other cheek?”

Peach folded her hands as if in prayer. “Bowser, please, you’ve never killed one of my subjects! You’ve already won!”

Bowser took a closer look at his opponent, and saw the mouse trying to limp away. “Huh…You’re right, I have most definitely won this fight. Well, it’s no skin off my nose.”

As he turned to leave Ms. Mowz behind, Bowser scratched his nose. “...Speaking of noses, I always thought this sort of nose looked rather fetching on you, Peach. Nothing like the big beak you’d see on a Koopa gal.”

“Please, listen! I’m begging–”

Not bothering to release his over-the-shoulder grip on peach, Bowser blasted up and into the air, “Ooooh-ho! Watch me, Peach! Are you watching? Aaaand…”

Bowser snatched the flag with one hand, tossed it aside, then came in for a graceful landing.

The moment he landed, Bowser spun on his heels and punched a red fireball straight through the great doors of the final fortress. “...Touchdown! The crowd goes wild!”

The Mario Maker’s voice echoed across the horizon, crystal clear. “World 8-3 Complete! World 8-4…Loaded!”

With a groan, one of the two doors snapped off its hinges and slammed to the ground. The other slowly started to catch fire. As Bowser did an end-zone celebration dance, Peach saw the final fortress looming over her. The doors had been twice as tall, and twice as thick as any that Bowser had blasted through before.

Peach felt like something was caught in her throat, before Bowser carried her through the doorway, and into the dim, torch-lit corridor.

…

Mario, Princess Daisy, and Toadette rode surfing on the backs of Kooper, Koops, and Koopie-Koo. With so many friends, they were forced to take the following steps: Daisy carried Luigi in her arms and Gonzales Jr. on her back, Toadette carried Goombario and Goombella in either arm, while Mario held Bombette and Admiral Bobbery in either hand.

This delicate balancing act was made more difficult by the fact an enemy Lakitu was chucking deadly Red Spinies at them. As he ducked to evade a projectile, Mario was forced to juggle his two perfectly-spherical friends to keep from dropping them.

The moment before a second Spiny could strike Toadette, Lady Bow appeared out of nowhere and knocked it aside with her fan. “Olé!”

Parakarry used a sky dive kick to knock out the Lakitu. “We could sure use Spike right around now!”

An enemy parakoopa dove at Parakarry from behind for a sneak attack, only for a red spiny to knock it out of the sky. Parakarry stiffened as he sensed the movement behind him, then spun to find Jugemu Jugemu Pokopii Lakilester AKA “Michael,” AKA “Jonathan,” AKA “Spike,” the Lakitu floating in the air above him. “Ask, and ye shall receive!”

Spike no longer had his customary sunglasses, so his puffy black eye was all the more noticeable, but he flashed a winning grin as he pointed a thumb at his chest with one hand, while deftly juggling three Red Spinies in the other.

Daisy twisted over her shoulder and bellowed. “Spike! Quit showing off!”

As he noticed his friends were all about to go flying off a floating brick pathway, on a direct path toward an artillery line of Bullet Bills, Spike fumbled his Red Spinies as he flew to the rescue. “Roger, wilco!”

Admiral Bobbery puffed his mustache. “Let a salty sea-bomb handle these pointy-headed projectiles! Toss me, Mario!”

Mario nodded. “Go for it!”

Mario tossed Admiral Bobbery like a fastball, and as the old bob-bomb smashed against the oncoming Bullet Bill, its cartoony frown turned upside-down, before both were engulfed in an explosion.

Bobbery flew through the air, and Mario caught him. Bobbery’s eyes were rolling, but apart from the fact his mustache and hat were both singed, he didn’t look much worse for wear.

Bombette cooed, then lit her own fuse. “Oh my! He’s such a gallant man! My turn, Mario! Let me at ‘em!

As the Koopas skipped like stones across the floating bricks, Goombario and Goombella jumped from Toadette’s arms to headbonk two enemy Parakoopas out of the sky.

The Koopas came to a crashing halt against a Bill Blaster, slamming a wide-eyed Bullet Bill back into the chamber the instant before it fired. As they all took a moment to catch their breath, Mario surveyed the path ahead, and noticed the castle they'd left behind start to crumble and collapse inward. This time, there was no tornado, only a rising pixelated cloud. "Gonzales Junior! You're up!"

Gonzales Junior stretched out his arms as three full-grown Koopas and two full-grown Bob-bombs hopped on his back. "Hoo-rah! I love piggy-back rides!"

Goombario and Goombella, who were more confident jumpers, ran forward alongside Mario and Daisy as they leapt along the maze of green pipes, all hiding Piranha Plants.

Goombario crashed headfirst into an enemy Parakoopa, knocking its wings off, then leapt off its shell to reach the other side of the bottomless pit below. "Mario! What's the attack plan when we catch Bowser?"

Mario bounced off a second Parakoopa, then kicked away an incoming Bullet Bill. "I'll take the lead, while the rest of you hold back."

Goombella flashed her fangs as she took out a Parakoopa by jumping on its back, then slamming back down onto it with her own skull: the patented Goomba Multibonk™ technique. "Don't try to be noble and tell us to, like, stay behind while you stay and fight Bowser to the bitter end. Cuz' that's totally off the table!"

Two Red Spinies, a Bullet Bill, and a Parakoopa all leapt at them from the top of a stone staircase. Goombario surprised the Parakoopa with a jump, smashing his head against its unprotected belly from below, before Goombella followed up with a finishing blow from above. Madame Flurrie belly flopped into the Bullet Bill, knocking it off its trajectory.

The two Red Spinies were knocked out of the sky by two balls of fire. Vivian emerged from Mario's shadow, and with a spin of her fingers, the two fireballs returned to her. "Yeah, we're shadowing you, and that's that."

Madame Flurrie fluttered back to join them. "We're the wind in your sails, darling!"

Admiral Bobbery caught up. "Aye, bucko! We're your crew!

Bombette arrived close on the Admiral's heels. "And you're our captain!"

Parakarry glided alongside them. "Our Postmaster General!"

Mario smiled as he shook his head. "Wouldn't have it any other way. But Bowser is a cunning fighter. If we aren't well-coordinated, he'll take full advantage of our distraction."

Gonzales Jr. turned his head. “Yeah, you use different moves when you’re fighting tons of people than when you are only fighting one…I learned that from Andre the Giant.”

Mario nodded as he led them on toward the final staircase, catching himself on the flag post. “Exactly, so let me fight on the front line, and you all look for an opportunity to attack Bowser. We’re in this together! No hot dogging!”

Spike took out the last enemy Parakoopa with a spiked projectile and slapped his bicep. “Yeah! No hot dogging! Or my name’s not: Jugemu Jugemu Pokopii Lakileter AKA ‘Michael’ AKA ‘Jonathan’ AKA–”

Everyone yelled the same word all at once. “Spike!”

Grinning, Spike pointed two finger guns. “–The Lakitu!”

…

Deep in the corridors of the final fortress, Bowser laughed maniacally as he leapt off a steel beam floating on a pit of lava. Then he hopped over a snapping Piranha Plant, with Peach in tow. “Bwah, ha, har! All too easy! Man, I’m feeling nostalgic just looking at this old lair. Why’d I ever move on from this model anyway? The design is brilliant!”

There was a low, angry “Beep!” and Bowser stumbled as he felt the ground shift under his feet. When he looked up, he blinked. Instead of seeing the end of the corridor, he only saw the same two pipes and lava pit he’d jumped over only a few seconds ago. “Aw, burn my toast! It’s the old magic maze! Hold on, I remember the trick to this…yeah, I just gotta use certain warp pipes, in a certain sequence. Genius, really! Intruders would never–”

Bowser leapt onto the first pipe he saw and dove down into it. To his relief, his butt didn’t get stuck this time. Then he felt himself going backwards. He and Peach reemerged out of another pipe…at the very beginning of the corridor. “What the–”

Bowser stared at Peach’s rear end, which was all he could see while she was dangling over his shoulder. “Peach, my love? Would you happen to recall the pattern for this maze?”

Peach made a cute little chirp. “Oop! I’m afraid I have no head for puzzles and mazes.”

Bowser sighed. “Ah, so blond. Well, you can’t help it, and I love you for it. In fact, I adore your blond hair!”

“And I love *your* blond hair! It’s so like mine!”

Bowser smiled sweetly as he leapt back over the same lava pit. “Yes, it is lovely, isn’t it, so…golden…”

He paused to examine his hair. “...But my hair’s red?”

Bowser saw Peach’s rear end twitch, as if it was nodding in agreement. “Is it? Why so it is! How odd, I could have sworn you were a goldilocks only this morning…and now you’re a ginger?”

Bowser shook his head. “You’re being silly again, Peachie-patootie. I’ve always been a ginger!”

Bowser hopped off the ledge, only for the fortress alarm to give another beep, and for the path before him to magically reset, right back at the first pipe. “Aaarrgh! See what you made me do?”

Peach made a silly-billy face. “Oooh! Did I do that? I’m so sowwy!”

Steam billowed from Bowser’s ears, then he took a deep breath. “Hmmm…I forgive you!”

…

As Goombario and Kooper, and Goombella and Koops both delivered a wombo-combo to each of the two Hammerhead Bros blocking their path, Mario smashed a brick to reveal a red mushroom, and scarfed it down. He looked up just as an enemy Parakoopa spotted him and arced downward on a collision course. Mario felt himself fall through the solid floor, into a dark nothingness, and heard the enemy crash into the brick where he’d been standing a moment before. Goomario headbutted the stunned enemy Parakoopa, knocking it off the floating platform.

Then Mario reemerged from his shadow, with Vivian clinging tight to him. “Mario! That one almost got you!”

Mario shook his head. “I had a mushroom, I’m fine! The others need you more than–”

Lady Bow popped out of nowhere in Mario’s face. “Bah! Señor Mario! We already know you are a true caballero! *Machismo* will not save Princess Peach.”

Madame Flurrie twirled into sight on a gust of wind, planted a big smooch on Mario’s nose, then tickled his chin. “Quite so! You are our frontliner, after all! We all need you alive, and in top fighting condition, to lead us! What was it you said before?”

Kooper thumbed his nose. “No hot dogging!”

The rest of Mario’s friends threw up their fists. “No hot dogging!”

Gonzales Jr. stuck out his tongue, gagging. “Yuck! I *hate* hot dogs! Ever since that one guy almost tried to cook me into one as a wee egg!”

Mario nodded, then turned to watch the horizon in the west. The gradual collapse of the obstacle course had slowed, but it was creeping nearer. “You’re right. We need a game plan to–”

A shudder traveled through the ground. Down the path ahead, they could make out a Bill Blaster. The Bullet Bill inside the chamber went wide-eyed, then glanced down at the ground, before both the Bullet Bill and the Bill Blaster were ejected into the air in a hiss of mechanical steam. A platform opened at the space beneath, and a large cannon arose slowly, easily 10 times the size of the Bill Blaster. With a series of clicks, and a dense thud, a Banzai Bill (the bigger, badder, blastier cousin of the common Bullet Bill) appeared in the chamger, a wicked toothy smile painted on its face.

Goombella squealed. “A Banzai Bill? That could blow up the entire course!”

Bombette glanced at herself and Admiral Bobbery. “Not even *we* could blast through its’ armored shell.”

Goombario saw Banzai Blaster start to angle upwards. “What about the Blaster? The gun-laying apparatus looks like a weak point!”

Mario nodded. “It’s our best shot! Parakarry, Spike! Give Admiral Bobbery and Bombette a lift so they can take out that Banzai Blaster! Once the path is clear, we’ll Koopa Surf across that platform and we’ll reach the final stretch. Then it’s all up to the Koopa squad to get us past the Hammerhead infantry line. Wait for the Blaster. Then we go in, fast and focused!”

As Admiral Bobbery hopped on Parakarry’s back to prepare for an air raid, the rope fuse on the back of the Banzai Blaster lit aflame. Mario shouted. “Don’t panic! Everyone in formation behind the Koopa Squad!”

Toadette, Mario, and Gonzales Jr. carried the three Koopas to the highest platform, waiting for a clear shot. Then Goombario, Goombella, and Gonzales’ Jr. perched on the riders’ shoulders, while Vivian and Lady Bow vanished from sight. Madame Flurrie donned her stage prop Valkyrie helmet and spear, preparing to fly on the winds like a graceful, 300-pound butterfly.

As Parakarry and Spike flew toward the enemy, the Banzai Blaster went ka-boom, and a Banzai Bill arched into the sky. Immediately, a second Banzai Bill appeared in the chamber, and with a poof, a new rope fuse appeared and lit automatically.

Koops rubbed his head. “Um…so we’re the Koopa squad, now? …I kinda like it!”

Koopie-Koo slammed her fist into her hand. Her usual hobbies included scrapbooking and watercolor, so this was her first adventure. “Nokonoko! I love it! I want that on our wedding invitations! Kooper? Wanna be my Bro-Maid of Honor?”

Kooper saluted. “I’d be honored! Congratulations, by the way!”

As the first Banzai Bill spotted Parakarry and Admiral Bobbery, it rounded in midair to target them. Mario held up his hand. “Steady.”

As Parakarry dropped Admiral Bobbery and Spike dropped Bombette, the Banzai Blaster fired a second shot, which spotted Mario and the Koopa Squad and aimed for them. With a mighty blast. Admiral Bobbery and Bombette impacted the sensitive mechanisms controlling the Banzai Blaster, and it collapsed, billowing steam. As Parakarry dove behind the brick wall and under the course, the first Banzai Bill ripped through the stone as it followed in hot pursuit.

Mario, Daisy, and Toadette rested their feet on one of the Koopas, ready to shoot forward. The Banzai Bill grew steadily larger in their field vision, its size creating the optical illusion that it was moving slowly, like an oncoming locomotive. Mario kept his eyes fixed on the approaching enemy. “Steady.”

The ground beneath their feet started to rumble. Spike flew alongside the incoming Banzai Bill and threw a Red Spiny right at its eye. It didn’t blink. Mario felt the wind rushing around them. “Now!”

Mario, Toadette, and Daisy stepped on the Koopas and blasted out of the kill zone, just as the Banzai Bill ripped straight through the brick platform and the stone floor below.

Spike spun loop-de-loops as he spotted his friends narrowly escaping the missile, only to notice the Banzai Blaster had paused in midair, slowly turning to fix its blood-shot eye on him. “...No hard feelings, right?”

Fire exploded from the Banzai Bill’s rocket propulsion system (or to use the vernacular term, from its butt).

“Crud! Crud! Crud!” Spike threw a hundred Red Spinies at the incoming enemy at machine-gun speed, a technique he’d learned from watching anime, and which works no better in *Super Mario Bros.* than it does in *Dragon Ball Z*.

Spike tried to fly out of the way, but friendly cloud pets don’t exactly fly like jets. The Banzai Bill hit him with a glancing blow, and Spike went into a death spiral. As he pulled out, he saw the Banzai Bill turning on a wide arc, but rather than target Spike again, it angled downward.

Then, in the West, the crumbling fortress exploded as the other Banzai Bill smashed through it, still hot on Parakarry’s tail. Parakarry cupped his hands to his mouth to call from a distance. “Laaaakileeeester! Keep him distracted!”

“Distract him from…what?” Spike turned. The Banzai Bill bill had spotted Mario below. A slow fire began to build as it charged its next blast.

Riding the Koopas, the riders flew over the smoking debris of the Banzai Blaster. Bombette spotted Admiral Bobbery hopping on a stone pillar ahead. Madame Flurrie cooed.

“Ohh! Let’s pick these hitchhikers up, Mario. They’re too cute to pass up!”

Mario caught Admiral Bobbery like a baseball, while Toadette let Bombette leap into her open arms. As all three riders caught a gust of air provided for them by Madame Flurrie, they skipped lightly over a second stone pillar, and knocked over two more Hammerhead Bros. like bowling ball pins, complete with the cartoon sound effect. Then they hopped a gap to a green pipe, which hid a Piranha Plant that tried to snap at them, before they knocked it aside.

Goombario heard a boom like thunder, and turned to see both Banzai Bills, alive and well. “Banzai Bill on our tail!”

Mario shook his head. “Nothing we can do! Leave it to the air squadron!”

Goombario looked ahead, and swallowed. A line of Koopa Troopas and elite Hammerhead Bros. were waiting for them.

As the Banzai Bill began to charge for its final assault, Spike saw what was about to happen, and acted on instinct. Spike knew that if it wasn’t stopped, it would incinerate the entire course, along with his friends. Before the Banzai Bill could launch, Spike tossed a second Red Spiny at its other eye. “Hey, man! Why doncha’ pick on someone one-tenth your own size?”

The Banzai Bill shivered, going bug-eyed, then fixing its gaze on Spike, slowly adjusted its aim to point at him. Spike flailed his arms and flew in zig-zags. Unlike Parakoopas, who could fly like falcons, Lakitu clouds fly more like bumble bees. Spike knew he was outclassed. “Or what about a peaceful resolution? You know, I was a bad guy once! But if you ask me, people can change, if–”

The Banzai Bill smashed into Spike again. Spike’s serpentine maneuvers bought him just enough time to roll with the hit and suffer another glancing blow, but it was still the third-hardest hit Spike had ever felt. The second-hardest had been delivered earlier today by Bowser’s crown-headbutt attack.

But the single hardest hit Spike had ever felt in his entire life…had been delivered by Mario.

Spike’s ears were ringing. Piff the Puff’s eyes were rolling like spirals.

He heard Parakarry’s voice echoing in the distance, followed by another explosion of steel. “Good! Juuuuuust liiiiike thaaaaaat!”

As his earlier concussion flared up, Spike saw the Banzai Bill coming in for the kill.

And then the strangest thing happened: Spike's life flashed before his eyes. Yes, that's a thing that really happens. It's not just an excuse for the scriptwriters to cram in an emotionally touching flashback sequence.

For example, Spike remembered all the work he put into choosing his cool new nicknames over the years. He remembered getting into fights at school, despite his girlfriend's pleas that he go to college. Then, "Big Boss" Huff N. Puff had offered him a job…an opportunity to make something of himself. Sure, Huff N. Puff's plan to cover the world with clouds through the power of the Puff Puff Machine, and destroy all flowers, didn't make much sense to Spike, but fighting for the Boss had given him a sense of purpose. Then, one day, Spike had been given a special assignment: to rough up some do-gooder who was meddling in Flower Fields. Huff N. Puff didn't tolerate unwelcome guests on his turf.

Ignoring the adorable cries of his main squeeze, the lovely Lakilulu, Spike had applied extra hair gel, donned his slickest shades, and practiced his dramatic introduction speech, using his coolest new nickname yet: Spike…the Lakitu!

Then he had set up an ambush near the Puff Puff Machine, waiting for his target to come to him. It was the perfect plan! But he couldn't bear the idea of just raining down Red Spinies from on high to snipe his target from afar. No, Spike loved a good scrap too much.

Finally, Spike spotted a short, fat, ruggedly-handsome man with a curly black mustache, wearing a bright red hat and royal blue overalls, and guessed it might be this Mario character he was ordered to take out of commission.

Spike flew to block Mario's path. "Hey, man! I don't think we've ever met, have we? I mean, you're Mario, right?"

Mario said nothing.

Spike spun a Red Spiny on his index finger like a basketball, then fumbled it. "My name is Lakilester... Er, no, it's Michael... No, um...Oh, yeah... Spike. Yeah yeah, I'm Spike…"

Mario said nothing.

Spike slicked back his hair. "Well, whatever. Never mind. Look, I don't have a problem with you personally, but I've got orders from Huff N. Puff. Sorry, man, but I have to give you a bit of a beat down. Like I said, man, sorry! (...Did I sound cool?)"

Mario said nothing.

Spike cracked his knuckles, then pulled out a Red Spiny to attack. "(Ha... Yeah, totally cool!) Here it comes, man!!"

Spike pitched the Red Spiny at Mario's face with a 90-mile-per-hour fastball pitch, only for Mario to produce a Hammer from his belt and swing it like a homerun derby slugger. The red spiny came spiraling back into Spike's face. As Spike scrambled to catch his sunglasses, Mario leapt into the sky and kicked Spike off his cloud. And *that* was the hardest Spike had ever been hit in his entire life.

Spike had laid on the ground, defeated. He begged Mario to finish him off quickly, or do whatever it was Mario does to his defeated enemies in a game rated E for Everyone.

Before Mario could finish Spike off, they both heard a beautiful voice calling.

"Wait!!!!!"

"Aw no, Lakilulu!!"

The lovely Lakilulu arrived, riding her pink cloud. "No! Please! Please have mercy on my poor, sweet Lakilester!"

Spike groaned. "Aw, don't call me Lakilester! It's Spike, remember? I told you I changed my name last month! C'mon now! Man... I mean, gee whiz... You're always embarrassing me like this...Although...for some reason it makes me like you even more...I mean, what? No!! Did I say that out loud? Forget that I said that! ...Anyway! I lost a challenge man-to-man, so we have to settle this. I have to face the music."

Lakilulu held up her hands, her eyes brimming with tears. "Mario, please forgive him! My Lakilester was just following Huff N. Puff's orders!"

Mario had paused, stroking his chin. "Hmmm….Nah!"

Lakilulu threw a red spiny at Mario's nose. "Ow! I was kidding! Of course I'll forgive him!"

As she dropped the second Red Spiny she had been aiming at Mario's face, Lakilulu squealed with delight. "Really!? Oh, for real? You'll forgive him? Oh, thank you!"

Spike picked himself back up. "Stop calling me Lakilester! It's such a stupid name! My name is Spike! SPIKE! Don't you ever listen to me? Sigh……I'm beginning to think that this whole deal is stupid. I was working for Huff N. Puff to be a part of something big, but all I've been doing is picking pointless fights...This isn't what I wanted in life. What I wanted was….Hey, man. I've got a question…What in the world are you doing all this fighting for?"

…

“Piff puff!” squeaked Spike’s cloud. As Spike fought to stay conscious, the Banzai Bill kicked into second gear. Spike couldn’t get out of the way fully, but he wouldn’t go down easy. He had something to fight for. Twisting to fly Piff in a tight spiral, Spike rolled to let his shell take the brunt of the impact, and heard a crack. Then he piloted Piff in a helicopter tail maneuver to keep his eye on the Banzai Bill, which was already preparing its next attack. “Parakarry? How long do I have to distract–”

Parakarry snatched Spike into a hug as he dove like a hawk, shoving him out of the path of the incoming Banzai Bill. The two Banzai Bills smashed into each other and exploded, ripping apart most of World 8-3 beneath them. Parakarry had to go into a swan dive to escape the explosion, then pulled up to spot Mario and the others, dodging flying debris and question mark blocks.

Spike felt something smack into his face, and saw a Fire Flower floating into nothingness. “Fire Flower? Fire Flower!”

Pulling a fishing rod out of his cloud, Spike cast his line and caught the power up, reeling it in. “Want! Need!”

Parakarry pointed toward the ground. “There they are! And there’s Ms. Mowz! She’s alive!”

The Koopas had barrelled through the line of Hammerhead Bros, and they were all racing toward the stone steps that lead to the final flag goal post.

Ms. Mowz waved her own flag to get their attention. She’d kept the one she’d snatched earlier…as a keepsake.

Mario spotted her and hopped off Kooper’s back to scoop her up, then he raced to catch up with the others as they leapt across the bottomless pit toward the final fortress.

Spike held up the fireflower. “Mario!”

As Mario dove over the flagpole and toward the fortress, he held out his hand, and Spike and Mario gave each other a sick mid-air high five. As Parakarry and Spike helped bring Mario and Ms. Mowz in for a soft landing, the power of the Fire Flower began to course through Mario. His hat and shirt turned white, his overalls glowed blood red, and fire seemed to radiate from his eyes.

Princess Daisy flashed two thumbs up, still balancing an unconscious Luigi in her arms. “Good work, everyone. Parakarry, Spike, that was a slick save.”

Parakarry rubbed the back of his head.

Spike shrugged. “Eh, call me Lakilester. Friends call me Lakilster.”

A ball of flame engulfed Mario’s fist as he stepped on the first stone step that led up to the interior of the final fortress. “Let’s-a go!”

[End of Chapter XVI]

Bowsette's Princess Lessons
Chapter XVII: Race to the Finish

Bowser counted on his slender, five-fingered hand as he emerged from the gray warp pipe, with Peach laying perfectly still over his shoulder. "Okay, this has *gotta* be the last leg of the maze. Running just traps me in a loop here…so it's gotta be a warp pipe!"

Peeking curiously down the first pipe he approached, Bowser flinched as a Piranha Plant snapped at his nose, then shot a fire ball with his free hand to incinerate it. "Eeek! Rude! So if that was just a Piranha Plant pot which resembles a warp pipe…then this next one must be the real warp pipe!"

As Bowser leapt atop the second gray pipe, it glowed with the colors of the rainbow, and he and Peach were sucked down into the warp. "Yes! Nailed it! See, Peach, that's how you design an evil–"

With a boop, Bowser and Peach emerged from the grey warp pipe…at the start of the entire maze. "...labyrinth?"

Bowser yanked at his blood-red hair. "Graarh! We're back at square one? …Peach, would you happen to have a pencil and paper on you?"

Peach pretended to fumble through her fanny pack, pulled out a pen and legal notepad, then shrugged as she stuffed them back in. "Nope! Sorry, no pencil!"

"Oogh! Whatever, I have this first chunk of the maze memorized anyway…Don't take the first pipe, that just takes you back to the first, first pipe."

Peach presses a finger against her luscious lips. "Hmmm, wouldn't it be better to call it the *second* pipe, so you don't mix it up with the first, first pipe?"

"No, the second pipe is…Hey, cut that out! I'm trying to concentrate! We jump *over* the lava, and take the second pipe…" Bowser hopped down the warp pipe and emerged in the second section of the maze. "...to the second-first pipe!

"See, that's my point, it's your naming conventions. You should use a lettering system, like Section-A Pipe #1, Section-A Pipe #2, Section-B Pipe #1, Section B Pipe #2–"

Bowser stared at his fingers, twitching them up and down to represent the different pipes ahead of them. "No, no no! You're gonna get me mixed up on the sections again! Maze sections are divided according to magical, infinite-floor-trap triggers, not warp Pipes! Now…starting from the second-first pipe, I'm remembering something about the second-second pipe. Crud! Is second-second pipe good or bad?"

“Wait, if you called the first pipe the first-first pipe, wouldn’t that make this one the second-first-first pipe?”

Bowser used his pink flames to fly over the two pipes that were causing him trouble. “No, no, first pipe is bad! My system makes perfect sense! Second-second pipe is…wait, you’re right, this one should be second-first-first pipe, so that makes this one second-first pipe, and this one one second-second pipe–”

“Ah, so that’s the one you want!”

Nodding, Bowser landed on the second-second pipe and sank down it, smirking at Peach’s upturned backside. “Exactly! Wow, thanks Peach-blossom, you’ve been a big–”

With a poof, they appeared at the start of the maze again. “–help?”

Peach held both her hands to her face in horror. “Oh nooooo! Did we mess up again?”

Bowser reared back his head, snarling. “Mrrraaaugh! Second-second pipe is bad! How’d I forget to–

Slowly, Bowser turned his head to stare at Peach’s rear end. “Wait a second…Peach…you’re not stupid.”

Peach swallowed, before using her most charming Princess voice. “Why, that’s such a lovely thing to say, Bowser. You know, they teach a whole course on the art of the delicate compliment at Princess Academy! For example–”

Smoke billowed from Bowser’s nostrils. “Nice try, tutz. I know what you’re up to. You’re stalling for time, hoping for that toilet-scrubbing–”

Bowser saw a fireball shoot above their heads and crash onto the floor ahead, and turned to spot Mario diving after them from the ledge above the start of the labyrinth.

Bowser’s eyes shone red, and with a blast of pink flame he shot up and away from his hated enemy. “–Mario?”

Peach reached for Mario. “Mario! Take the warp pipes *after* jumping over the lava pits! Lava, then pipe!”

Bowser twisted in mid air to rocket over the first section of lava, then blasted toward the first pipe he saw. “After the…lava? Peach, you brat! You knew the trick the whole time? That does it, as soon as we get home, I’m going to spank–” Bowser and Peach disappeared down the warp pipe.

Mario called over his shoulder to his friends as he sprinted and jumped off the red steel platform floating on the lava pit. “Follow me!”

Mario dove down the warp pipe after Bowser and Peach, followed by the rest of his party, with Princess Daisy bringing up the rear, using the fireman's carry to haul the unconscious Luigi over her shoulders. A shudder traveled through the floor of the fortress. A single stone tile glitched, then fell away into nothingness.

…

Bowser emerged from the warp pipe in the second section, and blasted into the air with a burst of pink flames. “Lava! Then! Pipe!”

Spiraling in mid air, Bowser kicked pink flames to torch the Piranha Plant that pounced at him from within the correct warp pipe, which hovered in mid-air on a floating platform. The maneuver forced him to adjust his grip on Peach, so that instead of dangling bottoms-up over his shoulder, he now held her in an almost-tender embrace. “Lava! Then! Pipe!”

Bowser caught a brief glimpse of Mario emerging from the previous warp pipe, blasting fireballs at the enemy Parakoopas, before Bowser and Peach were whisked away.

Peach beat her fists uselessly against Bowser’s chest, but all she managed to achieve was to make Bowser’s new breasts jiggle. “Bowser! Please, stop!”

Ignoring Peach. Bowser focused the warp zone exit shining above him, already charging his pink flame in one hand. “Lava…then…”

The second they emerged out the other end of the warp pipe, Bowser rocketed them into the air, and spotted the lava pit. “...Pipe!”

Then Bowser saw a purple Cheep-Cheep with an orange mohawk diving towards his face, making a fishy-face. As the Cheep-Cheep latched onto Bowser’s head, it started kissing him madly. Bowser twisted in midair, shielding Peach in his arms, before all three of them flew over the lava pit and crashed against the next warp pipe. Bowser shook his head like a dog to tear his lips free of the Cheep-Cheep, which bounced once and rolled dangerously close to the edge of the ledge.

Bowser arose, gagging, still cradling Peach like a small child against his breast. “Gaahg-fft!! Who the hell are–”

Peach’s face lit up as she recognized the Cheep-Cheep. “Mrs. Sushie!”

Bowser lifted a hand, and a pink fireball hovered in front of his palm. “Yeah, well if you don’t want to be Mrs. Grilled-Sushi, then stay back!”

Mrs. Sushie shielded her eyes against the bright flame with her fins. “Oooh, shame on you, young man! Why, I’ve a good mind to take you right across my knee and spank your bottom, little mister!”

Still holding up the flame to keep the furious fish at bay, Bowser hopped onto the gray pipe and sneered. “That’s sexist.”

Bowser and Peach fell down the warp pipe, and emerged in a dimly-lit room of glittering, sea-green stones, connected to a water-filled tunnel. Peach held her breath as Bowser carried them into the pool with a swan-dive. Bowser’s cheeks were puffed up as he held his breath. Peach forced her eyes open, and could make out a glowing purple warp pipe, labeled “Secret Entrance to the Mushroom Kingdom Royal Moat.”

Of course! That was how Mrs. Sushie had found them. If only Peach could reach it…

Mrs. Sushie splashed down into the watery chamber from above, then swam at Bowser. Bowser kicked away, and for a moment, pink flames burst from both his feet, creating an explosion of boiling bubbles before they were quickly extinguished.

Mrs. Sushie slammed into Bowser’s stomach, and he lost his mouthful of air. Bowser felt a pink flame die on his tongue as Mrs. Sushie slapped his face with her tail fin, desperately trying to shove Peach free from his grip. Peach managed to free herself from one of Bowser’s arms, and tugged to pull her trapped wrist from his powerful grip. As Mrs. Sushie swam a tight circle around Bowser, he tried to aim his fire breath at her, only to see boiling bubbles blurring his vision. Mrs. Sushie shot like a bullet, crashing down on his head from above, digging the crown deeper into his skull. Bowser spasmed, his movements slowed by the surrounding water. This wasn’t working! This stupid pink fire…it *tasted* all wrong.

There was a muffled splash as Mario dove into the water. Peach noticed, and reached toward Mario, still caught by one arm. Mrs. Sushie slammed against Bowser’s back from behind.

Then, as Bowser saw Mario, and saw Peach’s face as she looked at Mario, something clicked. As water filled Bowser’s lungs, Bowser pulled Peach tight against his chest. He tried to scream, “Maaarioooo!” but all that came out was a stream of bubbles…followed by a full, red flame.

Sensing something was coming, Mario swam to reach the ceiling, before a pillar of red fire ripped through the water. As 100,000 gallons of water were instantly boiled to steam, the sheer force sent a shockwave through the pool that knocked Mario into the stone wall on the other side.

The red fire tore through the purple warp pipe, melting it to slag, and Bowser, Peach, and Mrs. Sushie shot backwards across the entire length of the pool, crashing into the exit pipe on the opposite side. Mrs. Sushie took the brunt of the impact as they slammed to a halt, and floated

limply. Peach finally tore herself free from Bowser's grip and grabbed Mrs. Sushie, but as Peach turned, she knew there was no hope of escape. Bowser kicked away from the exit, his roar audible even under water as he charged a second shot of fiery breath. The entire underwater chamber had already begun to boil. Peach turned to the exit pipe and carried Mrs. Sushie through it.

As Bowser aimed his second breath attack at Mario, he saw two Koopas dive into the water and lift Mario up under his arms from either side. As his lungs screamed for air, Bowser screamed Mario's name again, and a second pillar of red fire ripped through the already boiling water.

Kooper and Koops felt their turtle shells starting to cook as they shot up and out of the water, carrying Mario along with them.

…

Just as Koops and Kooper emerged out of the water, Lady Bow floated toward the boiling pool and dove in, turning transparent as she disappeared in the billowing steam.

Fighting for air, Mario immediately stood up and tried to shove past both Koopas to chase after Lady Bow. Koops stammered as he tried to hold Mario back. "M-Mario? G-get a grip!"

Kooper shook his head. "It's no use! You'll never–"

Mario shook both of the Koopas off him, and leapt for the pool. He would have dove straight back in if Madame Flurrie hadn't intervened, letting him crash into her massive, sumo-wrestler-sized belly.

Mario didn't just feel the heat of the boiling steam. He physically felt it slam against his face like a solid punch as a pillar of steam erupted from the narrow pit that led to the underwater pathway.

Madame Flurrie puffed her cheeks to create a cold front of icy wind, which was barely enough to shield them as steam filled the room, the warp pipe above acting as the only exhaust.

…

Peach emerged from the warp pipe carrying Mrs. Sushie. Coughing up water, Peach glanced at the pipe she had come from, and saw a painted message that read "One-Way" with an icon of an arrow pointing up. Mrs. Sushie took a shaky breath, then went limp in Peach's arms.

Stumbling toward the next pipe ahead, Peach examined it, but as she peered down, she saw the warp zone within was beginning to glitch and dissipate. "World 8-4 is falling apart. No going back…"

Peach glanced up, and saw a red glow ahead. She knew it was a final lava pit, and beyond the ledge, the rope bridge that led to the exit. “...The only way out is through.”

Bowser shot up out of the warp pipe, then slumped forward, landing face-first on the stone floor. “Woo! Sweet, sweet air! Man, do I *hate* underwater levels!”

Lifting his face, Bowser spotted Peach. “...Hello, beautiful!”

Peach shook her head. She tried to think of an argument, a plea, but at the moment, she was too terrified, and a moment was all Bowser needed to snatch her by the waist.

…

As Mario strained against his friends to reach the boiling pool, Princess Daisy hooked Mario around his chest and pulled him back, still carrying Luigi’s slumped form over her back with one arm. “Mario? Cool it! That’s boiling water!”

Mario rounded on them, his eyes blazing. “No! I had them!”

Daisy slapped Mario across his face. Mario froze, and felt the tingling spot on his cheek, not quite believing what he’d just felt.

Tears appeared in Daisy’s eyes as she adjusted her grip on Luigi to cradle him. “Cut it out! I need you to think! We *all* need you to think! So quit hot dogging, and think of a plan that *doesn’t* involve getting boiled alive!”

Mario was so surprised by Daisy’s slap, it snapped him out of his hot temper. “...You’re right. Lady Bow’s gone ahead. She must have realized she was the only one who possibly could survive that, if she ghosted across…so in that case…”

Mario turned to Vivian. “...We’ll travel through the shadows. Vivian, please take me to Peach’s shadow.”

Vivian rested her hand against Mario’s shadow and shook her head. “No good. Peach isn’t connected to her shadow.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Toadette, are there any hidden paths around the pool?”

Toadette shook her head. “It’s the only route. It’s about 128 meters in length.”

As the room above the pool rose to the temperature of a sauna, Mario started to sweat bullets. “Goombario, Goombella, any chance we can survive that swim?”

Goombario swallowed as he did some quick math in his head. “World record for a 50 meter swim is about 20 seconds, so that’s at least 50 seconds swimming through boiling water.”

Goombella shook her head. “And if that doesn’t kill us outright, we’d be in no position to fight once we reach the other side.”

Mario glanced at the boiling pool. “Then there’s no choice.”

Mario twisted his hand and produced a fireball.

Daisy growled like a cat. “Mrrah! So you *are* gonna swim across a boiling lake?”

Mario shook his head. “You were right, Daisy. If I had tried that while Bowser was waiting for me, he’d have incinerated me. But thanks to the Fire Flower, my clothes are fire-resistant.”

Goombella bared her fangs. “Yeah, fire-resistant, not fireproof!”

“I’m not hot dogging this time…I’m the only one who has a chance of reaching them.”

They all went silent as they saw the truth of their situation. Princess Daisy glanced once at Luigi’s unconscious form slumped against her, and gave Mario a curt nod.

But Vivian clung to Mario’s sleeve. “I won’t leave you again! …If I hide in your shadow…”

Vivian trailed off as she saw the flaw in her own plan. Mario gently pulled Vivian’s hand away from his sleeve, holding her hand in his. “Can you get the others out of here, Vivian? Maybe if you take them to Goombaria’s shadow, back at the castle?”

Vivian’s lip quivered. “I…I hadn’t thought of that…but it’s risky. The shadows are treacherous here.”

A tremor passed through the ground. Mario squeezed Vivian’s hand. “Then wait as long as you can. If there’s no other way, I’m counting on you to save my friends, to save my brother…”

As Mario released his hold on Vivian’s hand, he looked up to see the faces of all his gathered friends, taking a final deep breath. “And if I fail, I’m counting on you all to help Peach…There’s nothing you can’t do, if you all hang together. Good luck, my friends...Arrivederci!”

With that, Mario turned and dove headfirst into the bubbling, steaming pool. The moment he broke the surface, he felt the heat pressing in on him from all sides. Boiling water seeped into

the gaps of his gloves, and down the collar of his shirt. Every square inch of exposed skin screamed at him in protest, but he shut his eyes tight and swam forward.

Sure enough, he felt the power of the fire flower like a thin envelope surrounding his body, just barely pushing back the external heat. But it was like holding onto white-hot metal with oven mitts. With every second that passed, Mario felt the heat press slowly, but surely, through the protective layer.

As he pressed blindly forward, Mario knew that if this didn't work, if he couldn't find his way past the obstacles, if the fire flower didn't hold back the water long enough, he would die in agony, having accomplished nothing. But his mind was calm. The only way out was through.

[End of Chapter XVII]

Bowsette's Princess Lessons
Chapter XVIII: Strange Fire

Bowser huffed as he hauled Princess Peach up onto his shoulder. "Alley oop! …Phew, you've really gotta lay off the cake. It all goes right to your–"

As Bowser turned, a snarling spectre leapt at his face out of nowhere and slapped him across his face. "Grreeaah!"

Bowser squealed like a girl and spun in a circle. "Aaaiieeek! Where did–"

Peach caught a quick glimpse and recognized the ghost: it was Lady Bow! Then Bowser finished turning on his heels to face this enemy, and saw Lady Bow flourish two ornate fans in her hands. "Boo!"

Lady Bow waved her fans in front of her, and as she did, she vanished. Bowser felt a chill travel up his spine, and twisted. Lady Bow appeared at his side and struck him with her fan. "Olé!"

As Bowser reeled from the blow, Lady Bow appeared on his opposite side and struck again with her other fan. "Olé!"

Bowser released a quick blast of his fiery breath, covering a wide angle. Over his shoulder Peach squeaked as she felt the fire come dangerously close to burning the seat of her skirt. "Eek! Bowser! Cut it out!"

Bowser snapped his mouth shut with a snap. "Shoot! You okay, Peach-pumpkin? Wait, how do I fight her without–"

Bowser felt a little ghost hand under his chin, before Lady Boo appeared in his face and smacked his face multiple times in quick succession. "Olé Olé Olé Olé Olé Olé Olé Olé!"

Incidentally, Lady Bow was a huge fan of *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*.

Bowser tried to blast her away with fire breath, only to hesitate and swallow the red fire at the last possible moment. As he swung wildly for Lady Bow, she disappeared before his eyes. "Hey! No fair!"

Lady Bow appeared on Bowser's opposite side, using the handle of her fan like a dagger to jab him in the gut. "Fair?"

Bowser swung a claw at her, and Lady Bow disappeared with a flourish of her fans, reappearing again to smack him across the back of his head, Lady Bow's fan glancing of the crown as she swung with all her might. "You dare to speak of what is fair?"

Lady Bow disappeared from behind Bowser, then appeared in front of him, striking with the fan again. “You *toro!* You unleashed that monster Tubba Blubba on my pueblo!”

Without thinking, Bowser swung his free arm and blasted a pink fireball at Lady Bow. Instead of disappearing, Lady Bow pirouetted out of the way, still visible. Spotting an opening, Bowser charged to land a wild haymaker.

Charging a red fireball in his fist, Bowser’s punched a hole into the brick wall where Lady Bow had been a moment before, leaving scorch marks behind. “Aw! Gimme’ a break!”

As Bowser felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end, he knew Lady Bow was about to sneak up on him and spun to blast another red ball of fire. Lady Bow shrieked and dropped one of her fans to shield her eyes. As Bowser shot the fireball, Lady Bow spun out of the way, so narrowly, that one of the ribbons of her red hair bows caught on fire. Sneering, Bowser aimed a knife hand strike at Lady Bow and his red fire cut through the air like a sickle. “He was *way* too good a minion to pass up.”

Lady Bow rolled in midair to evade the cutting blade of red fire. Bowser lunged forward to snatch the ghost out of the air, but she spun to disappear from his grasp. Bowser’s smile widened to a full grin. “Cutting out your heart to achieve invincibility? Now that’s showing initiative! …Too bad it didn’t quite work, but still–”

Spinning to look behind him, Bowser spotted Lady Bow coming in for another strike with her fan, and blocked it.

Bowser smacked Lady Bow to the ground with a flick of his wrist, red fire dancing on the palm of his hand. Lady Bow bounced once on the ground, and looked up, her face singed. “...He *ate* my neighbors alive!”

Bowser shrugged. “Eh, you’re ghosts. I don’t think it counts as killing you if you’re already dead to begin with. Now, it’s been lovely doing the fandango with you, but I’m saving the last dance for my date. So if you’ll excuse me–”

“No! I will not allow it! If you plan to abduct Peach, you will have to step over my dead body!”

Bowser held up his free hand, palm pointing outwards. “Let’s test that theory.”

A steady stream of red flame poured out of Bowser’s palm. An instant before it engulfed Lady Bow, she shielded her face and turned semi-transparent. Peach slapped the back of Bowser’s turtle shell to get his attention. “Bowser! Don’t hurt her!”

Bowser craned his neck toward Peach as he kept shooting red flames to hold down Lady Bow. “Relax! She can’t move while I’m doing this. All right, Chica, as fun as it is to bully you nerds, I’m in a rush, so kindly–”

A pink bullet of fire shot out of Bowser's open palm, ripping a hole through the thick, red flames. Bowser's arm flailed in the air as he felt the recoil. Lady Bow held her breath as the pink flame passed right through her. Lady Bow felt no pain. After all, as long as she held still, Lady Bow was intangible, so the pink flame was *supposed* to go right through her.

Then Lady Bow saw a small, burning hole had been cut in her fan, and felt a thin prick, like a sewing needle, pressing into her chest. And as Lady Bow looked down, she finally saw a thin tongue of pink flame, flickering from a wound in her breast. "What…sorcery…"

Lady Bow collapsed. Behind her, a small hole had been burned through the stone.

Bowser examined his palm. "Huh?"

Peach yelled. "What did you do?"

Bowser grinned sheepishly. "Uh, I'm sure she's fine. Boos are hard to kill, even on purpose."

As Bowser turned to progress down the chamber, Peach spotted Lady Bow as they left her behind. "Lady Bow! Oh, Bowser, what have you done to her?"

"It was self defense!"

"It's *not* self defense if *you* start the fight!"

Bowser whined as he charged red flames from his feet, preparing to lift off. "But *she* started it! Why do you always have to root for the little guy?"

With a blast of flame, Bowser took off, flying over the lava pit, and toward the ledge that led to the final bridge, and their escape. "Can't you see, I'm trying to save–"

A little baby Sparky burst out of the lava, her lollipop flying out of her mouth as she hollered a war cry in an adorable, childish lisp. "Pika-Pikaaaa!"

Watt the Sparky slammed against Bowser's bottom, and unleashed a devastating electric shock that electrocuted both Bowser and Princess Peach. Sparky roared like thunder, releasing a shock wave."Goro-goro!"

The blast sent Bowser flying forward, leaving a trail of steam behind him. Shielding Peach in his arms, Bowser came rolling to a halt on the steel and chain-link bridge that led to the exit.

Watt bounced forward, looking thoroughly proud of herself. "Gotcha! Mr. Mario told me to stop you, and I did it! Now, Mr. Bowser…stop being a bad guy!"

Bowser shivered as he saw Peach's prone form in her arms, then rounded on Watt, his nostrils billowing smoke. "You lil' brat! You hurt *my* Peach!"

Watt noticed Peach. "Huh? Ms. Peach, why are you with Bowser?"

Peach groaned. "I'm fine. Please, Bowser, just listen to–"

Flakes of ember flew from Bowser's mouth like spit. "You *HURT* her! Rrraaawwwrrr!"

With a deep, low boom, a pillar of red fire shot from Bowser's mouth. Watt tried to leap up and out of the way, but Bower angled the shot up and caught Watt with the full force of the attack. It slammed Watt into the ceiling with such force, it cracked the stones and left a glowing, white-hot crater behind. Watt fell limply from the ceiling, bounced on the floor, and came rolling to a halt against the wall.

Peach screamed, lunging forward to reach the baby Sparky. "Lil' Watt!"

But Bowser caught her around her waist. "Let's go, Peaches, I've gotta get you out of–"

Peach rounded on Bowser and struck him full across the face. "You beast! How could you hurt her?"

Ordinarily, a slap from Peach wouldn't even phase Bowser, but in his feminine form, he actually felt it. Bowser nearly lost his grip on Peach, before remembering to use both hands. "But that thing hurt *you!* It attacked me!"

"She's a *CHILD!!"*

Peach tried to pull her wrist free away from Bowser, then turned to look for Watt. The Lil' Sparky's body was glowing white like hot molten glass, thick wisps of steam billowing above her. Watt rolled onto her side to look up at Peach. "...Miss Peach? I don't feel so good…"

Boser hooked Peach around her chest to pull her into a tight grapple. "There, see? She's fine. Lil' Sparkys are built tough."

Peach spun to face Bowser, grabbed the sash on his shredded dress, and slapped him three times. "Excuses! Excuses! Always excuses! You hurt people, and then you pretend it doesn't matter!"

Bowser flinched as he felt the slaps, but kept his hold on Peach, picking her up and spinning to carry her toward the exit. "Okay, okay, I'm sorry! Shesh, I wasn't trying to hurt her."

With the power of a red mushroom, Bowser was strong enough to carry Peach, even in his female form…but he wasn't quite as strong as he used to be. Peach twisted her grip on

Bowser's sash to gain leverage, and strained to push away from Bowser, forcing him to release her as he stumbled forward. Peach leapt back to give herself distance, holding her hands up defensively. "Then *stop* hurting my friends!"

Bowser caught himself on the chain link that acted as the suspension for the rickety bridge. "Careful! We're over lava!"

"Careful? You broke the Super Mario Maker! You've put all our lives at risk!"

"How was I supposed to know? You're the one who programmed it! You should have put in more safety features."

"And *you* should have listened to me when I told you to stop! My friends are in danger! They need our help! But you only care about yourself!"

Bowser bared his fangs. "That's not true! I care about *you*, Peach. I love you!"

"No you don't! If you really loved me, you'd stop treating me this way! You'd let me live my life!"

Bowser rolled his eyes. "Oh, spare me, Peach. You're telling me you want to sit in your palace all day? Eating cakes? Attending stuffy royal functions? I know you too well. You crave adventure! The thrills, the romance! I see that big, goofy smile on your face everytime Mario shows up to kidnap you from me! You *love* being kidnapped! That's why you *pretend* to like that Mario guy: to make me jealous, so I enact a daring plan to rescue you from him."

Peach faltered. Bowser was so wildly wrong, and yet so strangely observant, she nearly lost her train of thought. "I don't–I don't *pretend* to like Mario! He's my friend!"

"Yeah, yeah, short, fat, funny-looking, low-class, low-income–pretty scrappy, I'll give him that–but definitely not in your league. Ya know, I used to feel threatened by him, but then I got to thinking, if you really loved Mario, you'd have just married the poor schmuck years ago. But you *haven't* married Mario, because you *don't* love him, because you're waiting for a *real* man to show up, and sweep you off your feet! And that's me, of course!"

Peach stammered. "But…But…"

She had started to say the same words she had said, time and again: "But I don't love you, Bowser!"

But she didn't say those words. Instead, Peach said the first thing that came to mind. "But…but I *do* love Mario."

And as Peach said those words out loud, for the first time in her life, it was as if she had forgotten all about Bowser, all about the present danger.

Bowser's smile disappeared. A lock of hair fell out of place, shimmering as it caught the ambient red light. "What?"

A tremor traveled through the floor, sending the steel bridge swaying slightly. A bubble burst in the lava below. Bowser's face turned suddenly pale. "There's no time for arguments. Your life is more important than anything, Princess."

Peach snarled, then raised her fists, remembering Princess Daisy's boxing classes. "No! I refuse to be bullied! Bower, you…you bucket-head! Put up yer' dukes!"

Before he could react, Bowser felt his mouth moving. "To what end? So that you can die here? And what of your kingdom? What of your people? Would you throw your life away, and leave them without a protector?"

Peach's fists trembled, her eyes suddenly doubtful. "I…I won't–"

Bowser was no less surprised than Peach by his own argument. As he felt the words flow, he recognized them as his own thoughts, his own observations, but ones he could never articulate before this moment. "Your father is old, and feeble, and has failed to produce a male heir. The Mushroom Kingdom *must always* have a rightful king. Do you understand what that means? You will be Queen Toadstool, but only by right of primogeniture…Your first-born son will be the King of the Mushroom Kingdom. You have no choice!"

Peach felt her breath falter. "I…I've always wanted to be a mother, ever since I was a little girl. That *is* my choice!"

Bowser's eyes shimmered like blue ice, in sharp contrast to the warm ambient that radiated from the lava below, holding up his/her hand, almost gently. "Then you must live, no matter the cost. Come with me, Crown Princess Toadstool."

Peach saw the reflection of her own face on the golden surface of Bowser's crown, and something about it frightened her, more than even Bowser himself. "...No…If you cross that line, it will be the death of the others…Those *are* my people! I will not let you!"

With a flick of the wrist, Bowser created a quick flash of pink flame in his/her open palm. As Peach recoiled from the blinding light, Bowser charged to tackle her.

…

In the underwater chamber, Mario felt a stone obstacle blocking his path, then swam upwards. He tried to peek a glimpse of the warp pipe that was his only exit, and felt boiling water pressing against his eyes. No good. At least two more obstacles blocking his path. The protective power of the Fire Flower was overwhelmed. Mario used a freestyle stroke to propel forward, then

switched to a kick stroke to aim downward at where he could only guess the pipe would be. The only thing keeping him from screaming was the knowledge that, as soon as he opened his mouth, boiling water would fill his lungs. Behind his closed eyelids, red and white stars filled Mario's vision…

…

As Peach struggled to see past the blinding light, Bowser lifted her up in a bear hug and began to carry her, step by step, toward the finish line. Peach slammed her fist into Bowser's face.

Bowser flinched, holding Peach tighter against his/her breast. "There's no point. You lack the strength to hurt me."

But as Bowser tried to secure his/her grip, Peach used the momentum to kick up her heels and shove herself out of Bowser's grip. Peach landed hard on her rear end and back, but managed to break her fall.

Bowser stumbled back, grabbing the chain link for balance, then thrust forward, snatching Peach's wrist and pulling her up as she struggled to regain her footing. "Enough of this!"

Peach aimed an elbow strike at Bowser's head, then tried to hook her arm around her foe's neck, hoping to pull Bowser off balance. But instead Peach caught the Crown of Queen Toadstool in a tight grip. Without thinking, Peach wrenched at the Crown, slamming her other hand into Bowser's jaw to secure her judo hold, but as long as Bowser had the power of both a Red Mushroom and a Fire Flower, it was as if Peach was hitting solid concrete.

As Peach twisted at the Crown, Bowser felt like he had sharp fangs digging into his skull, and reared to shake Peach loose. "Aauurgh! Get *OFF* my *HEAD!!"*

Bowser was overwhelmingly stronger than Peach. He was *used* to being ridiculously stronger than Peach. But without his old body, Bowser was just *slightly* weaker than he used to be, even with the magic power of the Red Mushroom. So when Bowser felt something hurting him, something he couldn't shake off, he panicked, and used his full strength. Bowser shoved Peach away, sending her flying back, almost slowly, towards the stone steps that led to the exit.

As Princess Peach crashed down backwards against the step, there was an ugly crack of bone against stone. Bowser froze, and even as the radiant heat of molten lava billowed around him, he felt only ice in his veins.

His hands shook as he reached for Peach. "Peaches?"

An older woman's voice screamed in his ears. *"Take her!"*

Bowser stumbled as he sought the source of the voice, which seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, then spotted the great, gilded war axe that hung over his old throne room. On the surface of the axe blade, he saw his own reflection…but it was also Peach…but it also neither of them. *"Quickly! To the exit! You're her only hope! She is MY only hope!"*

Bowser hugged himself. "You were in my dream! This is just a dream! This isn't happening!"

"This is your victory! There's nothing left to stop you! But reach out your hand, and she is yours! Her Kingdom is yours! This is what you wanted! Kill Mario! Claim Peach as your prize!"

Bowser ran his fingers through his hair, his head swimming as his vivid, red-gold locks blurred his vision. "...Kill Mario? …Save Peach? No! Not like this! This isn't my dream! I have to beat Mario, fair and square. Peach has to watch me win the fight, and tell me how cool I looked. I need them to know…I need to know…that I was always the bigger man!"

"...Then you leave me no choice."

Bowser twisted to look away at the horrible reflection of his own face, and found himself standing in an infinite, black void. He was alone.

A blaring stage light activated, illuminating a single, white King-Koopa egg, resting on a nest.

Then, Bowser saw himself, outside of himself. Feeling small, Bowser looked up to find a much younger version of Bowser Koopa, in his good, old turtle form, resting a claw gently on the egg. "Well, congrats, Claudia, you got shared custody. We'll be seeing an awful lot of each other now, for forever."

They were in Bowser and Morton's childhood home, which Claudia had fought tooth and nail to claim for herself, despite having always hated the place. "I think I can stomach seeing you pick up Junior once a week…watching you have to drop him off makes it all worth it!"

Bowser Koopa didn't bother to look up as he meticulously fiddled with the incubator, and examined the manual.

Claudia sniffed. "You know, Warty and I *were* going to spend the week together at Sirena Beach."

Bowser Koopa scowled as he attached the egg-care manual to the refrigerator. "Well, too bad. It's not my fault you didn't bother to read the calendar."

Claudia crossed her arms. "You *could* have taken Junior for another week. Not like you had any plans."

Bowser Koopa sneered, then pumped a fist. “As a matter of fact, I *do!* For months, my spies have been constructing a massive flying fortress underneath Princess Peach’s castle, so that I may carry her off on a romantic getaway through the heavens! Do you have any idea of the logistics involved? It’s a triumph of modern Koopa engineering.”

Claudia pulled a file from her purse to give her claws a manicure. “Oh, still chasing after that poisonous bimbo? You know what I like about Warty? He sets achievable goals, and then he meets them. He has *actual* ambition.”

Bowser Koopa gestured to the heavens as he entered into his villain-monologue mode. “To *achieve* my goals…I plan to assault the Star Haven, and seize the Star Rod for myself. With its all-mighty power, I shall become immortal and rule the world. All my wishes shall finally be granted!”

“Daddy?”

Bowser turned as he heard the childish voice, and as he did, Bowser looked at his pale hands, Bowser remembered that he was small and weak. He was not the same as the young Bowser Koopa that towered over him.

Little Larry “Cheatsy” Koopa appeared in the doorway, and Bowser saw he was at a height with the Koopaling. Larry roared with joy and ran *through* Bowser’s ghostly spirit to cling to the leg of the mighty Bowser Koopa. “Daddy! You’re finally home!”

Six more children darted into the room, with more cries of, “Daddy? Daddy! Daddy’s home!” Morton “Big Mouth” Koopa Jr. (no relation to Bowser’s twin Morton C. Koopa), clutched an American football. Wendy O. Koopa threw aside a glammy fashion magazine. Iggy “Hop” Koopa held up a toy race car made of N&B blocks (the favored alternative to Legos in the Mushroom Kingdom). Roy “Bully” Koopa accidentally knocked Larry aside as he vied for Bowser Koopa’s attention.

Lemmy “Hip” Koopa smiled, his lazy eye making his childish joy look almost comical. “Are you gonna’ stay forever?”

“Kooky” Ludwig von Koopa shoved Lemmy aside, holding up blank sheet music covered in pencil marks. “Dad? Check it! I wrote a cool new theme song for you!”

Bowser Koopa stiffened. “Aw, crud! Claudia, why are your kids here? I thought you put them in Bad Guy Boarding School?”

Claudia shrugged. “I can’t keep up with all these new holidays.”

Larry grabbed at Bowser Koopa’s other ankle. “We missed you, Daddy! Stay with us!”

Bowser Koopa shook his head, and tried to step over the mob of children to reach the door. “No, no, no! Crud, this was only supposed to be a quick drop-off. Claudia, did you plan this?”

Claudia grinned as she examined her nails. “...Maybe!”

All the Koopalings howled with despair as they realized Bowser Koopa was leaving.

Larry wailed. “No! Don’t leave!”

Morton back and forth looked from Bowser Koopa to his siblings. “What’s happening?”

Iggy tossed aside his toy block car. “Boarding school is awful!”

Ludwig dropped his sheet music. “It’s stifling my creativity!”

Roy fidgeted with his sunglasses. “Yeah, they even bully *me* there!”

Lemmy clung to Bowser Koopa’s leg. “It is ‘cuz we screwed up fighting Mario? We’ll get him next time, Daddy, I promise!”

Bowser Koopa looked back and forth at his adopted step-children, his eyes wide. “No, no, no, Daddy’s got important…I mean, you’ve got to stay with Mommy now, and Warty…uh, I mean, Mr. Mamū. Claudia, that incubator’s designed to be idiot proof. Just don’t screw with the thermometer, and everything will be fine.”

Bowser, the real Bowser, screamed, and dove to grab the younger Bowser Koopa around the ankle. “No! It’s *not* gonna be fine! Don’t do it!”

Wendy started sobbing. “You…you said you’d be our Daddy forever!”

Bowser Koopa swallowed, and stomped toward the door. “Sorry, kid…but I’m not your real father. Now, I’m off to claim the Star Rod! Mwah, ha, ha, har!”

As the younger Bowser Koopa shook himself loose and hustled to the door, only the spirit Bowser himself managed to hold on tight enough to be dragged along. “No! Your kids need you! You *know* this is wrong!”

As the younger Bowser Koopa dove out the door to escape the hoard of crying children, the real Bowser felt his face slammed against the door frame. Bowser howled and clutched his bleeding nose, and felt a fat lip. “You need to be a man…for them!”

As Bowser looked up, the room had vanished, along with all his children. A CRT-television flickered to life, silently blinking the message: “Alert! Alert!”

A door opened, and Bowser turned to find the younger Bowser Koopa holding aloft the Star Rod, with a big goofy grin on his face and Kammy Koopa at his side. “Ah! What a perfect day! Can’t believe Peach was sneaking around after curfew, disguised as one of my own soldiers!”

Kammy shook her head. “We should discuss disciplinary measures for Princess Toadstool. If she could escape her room this whole time, who knows what kind of information she could pass on to Mario?”

Bowser Koopa shrugged. “Eh, well now that’s over, I can finally concentrate on finalizing the defensive measures for–”

Bowser Koopa spotted the blaring red alarm. “That’s odd, it’s not the Mario Bros. Emergency Alert System…Incubator Security Breach?”

This time, Bowser seemed to see the monitor through his own eyes. He was no longer watching the memory as a third-party spectator. He was himself again. Bowser scrambled to punch in Claudia Koopa’s number on the high-tech video phone. “Claudia? What’s going on?”

Claudia fumbled with her Koopa phone. “Oh, by Kuzenbo’s bald head, what is it this time?”

“Did you fiddle with the thermostat again?”

“Of course I did! The climate is warmer on Delfino Isle, so the thing blinked at me and I pressed the button.”

“Delfino Isle? What are you doing there? You’re supposed to be watching the incubator!”

“Do you think I’m completely irresponsible? I brought it with me, of course! Warty finally figured out we could strap it to the Koopa Clown Car with duct tape. He’s so handy!”

“You went flying around with our egg? Where is it? Show me!”

Claudia rolled her eyes, then pointed the phone camera so it showed the empty incubator. “Gawd! This is like our bloody honeymoon all over again. It’s right here!”

Bowser grabbed the television, desperately trying to reach through the screen to the other side. “The incubator’s empty? Where’s the egg!”

“Huh? …Oh, the egg! Let’s see, I think I last saw it when we took off. The turbulence was awful! Hmm…I suppose we must have lost it along with the other luggage.”

Bowser slammed the control panel. “You dropped our egg out of a plane? Kammy! Get the Koopa Troopa Patrol out in full force!”

Kammy flailed her arms. “But…where do I send them?”

Bowser shook his fist at the image of Claudia on the screen. “Where did this happen? When did this happen?”

Claudia scowled. “You’re so pushy! …I suppose it must have been a week ago, somewhere over the Mushroom Kingdom.”

“A week? Our egg has been stranded in the wilderness for a week? Claudia, that is our child!”

Claudia smirked. “Oh, Bowzee, I don’t have to put up with your tantrums anymore. Anyway…it was just an egg.”

“No! That’s our–” Claudia hung up. Bowser stared at the blank, black screen, then slammed his fist through the spot where Claudia’s face had been a moment before.

Bowser felt tears streaming down his face. “Rraaaaah! My child! My *only* child! My…my *BABY!!!”*

Bowser heard two voices speaking over one another, one like old Kammy Koopas, and another…one he didn’t know. *“...Your heir.”*

Rounding on Kammy Koopa, Bowser saw an image of a beautiful woman with golden hair, superimposed over the image of his old advisor. Bowser snatched the woman by the throat and slammed her into the wall. “You! I *know* you! What have you done to me?”

The woman in the mirror…Bowsette…clutched feebly at her throat. “I…can’t do anything to you! I serve you! I *am* you!”

“Liar! I know illusion magic when I see it! Release me from this prison!”

Bowsette gurgled. “Can’t…prison…is your own mind!”

Bowser tightened his grip. “Stop speaking in riddles!”

Bowsette twitched her hand, and on the unbroken screens, multiple videos began to play. Bowser saw himself being knocked into a pit of lava by Mario, saw himself crash-landing in his flying Clown Car as Mario stomped him, saw himself plummeting to the floor as Mario knocked Chain-chomps off the chandelier that held them up, saw himself being spun and thrown into a spiked bomb trap…by Mario.

Bowsette took a raspy, wheezing breath. “I’m starting to think…you enjoy losing. But with my power–”

Bowser threw Bowsette into the control panel, smashing all but one of the televisions. “I don’t need your power! I can beat Mario with my own strength!”

Bowsette waved a trembling hand, and an image of Peach appeared on the final screen. They both lay prone, helpless, a mirror-image of one another. “...And what about Peach?”

Bowser was fixated on the final screen. Bowsette chuckled, but her laughter was strained, as if her ribs were broken. “Heh…so beautiful…but I can feel her heart fading…time moves…slowly here…you still have time…”

“Time? Time to do what?”

“...Time to think….to make the right decision…just pick her up…carry her across the finish line…and Mario will be dead.”

The final screen flickered with static, and alarms blared on all sides. “Red Alert! This is not a drill! Mario has breached the perimeter! All units to your stations! Prepare for battle!”

An image of Mario appeared on the screen, surrounded by all seven of the Star Spirits, the ancient guardians of the Star Rod, and a gaggle of Mario’s pathetic little friends following close behind.

Bowser heard his past self roar. “Mario, again? Mario, Mario…It’s always *Mario!* I’ll *KILL* him!!!”

Bower remembered holding the Star Rod above his head, remembered having the power of the heavens course through him, remembered how he had charged out to face Mario himself, wielding the strength of a god…and he remembered losing.

Then Bowser saw the past version of himself charging out of the room, and looked down to find his hands were frail, with five fingers again.

The image of Peach reappeared on the screen, reflecting on Bowser’s eyes as he reached toward her. “...kill…Mario?”

The entire television screen seemed to fill Bowser’s vision as he reached his pale hands through the screen, to grasp Peach.

[End of Chapter XVIII]

Bowsette's Princess Lessons
Chapter XIX: The Good Samaritan

Little Mario and little Luigi were sitting on the coziest spot of the couch. Mario clutched a video game controller in his first as he booted up *Popeye* on the Mario family's Nintendo Entertainment System. "This time, I'm gonna' kick Bluto's butt for sure, and save Olive Oyl!"

Luigi tugged at the controller in Mario's hand. "Hey! You're always Player 1! Let me have a turn!"

Mario pulled the controller away. "It's a two-player game, Luigi. You'll get a turn!"

"Yeah, but I want to be player 1."

"No you don't. You want me to go first so you know what's in store for you."

Mama Mia Rigassi Mario clapped her hands. "Knock it off! It's reading time. You can play video games after the story, *if* you quit squabbling."

Mario groaned. "Ah, Mama Mia! More boring old books?"

Luigi held up a finger. "But reading opens up whole new worlds, Mario!"

Mama Mia poked Giuseppe Mario's shoulder as he sat snoozing in his easy chair. "Papa? It's reading time!"

Papa Mario started awake, and fumbled to find his place. "Let's see…Ah, yes, *The Parable of the Good Samaritan*! …A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead."

Little Luigi raised his hand. "Why'd they do that to the man?"

"Because they were bad guys."

Little Mario grinned, and punched his bean bag chair. "How bad did they work him over? Was the guy all bruised and bloody, with his teeth knocked out?"

Papa Mario shook his head. "Yes, no, probably, I dunno, shut up! Sure, let's say the poor chump's lying bleeding on the side of the road…where was I? …A priest happened to be going down the same road–"

Luigi's hand shot up. "A priest? Like Father Martinet?"

“No! Not like Father Martinet! Different kind of priest! Anyway, guy’s bleeding on the road, priest’s going down the same road, and, uh…and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too–”

Little Mario grabbed his head. “Wait, he just walked by the guy? He’s bleeding to death! Father Martinet would *never* do that!”

Papa Mario rubbed his eyes. “Yeah, exactly, because Father Martinet is a steady guy. But the priest in this story was a real sonnova’–”

Mama Mario cleared her throat. “Ahem!”

Papa Mario snapped his fingers. “Um, a son of a *good woman*, who raised him to be better than that! Anyhoo, guy’s dying, blood everywhere, Priest’s leaving him behind and…So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.”

Luigi bounced on his bean bag chair, his hand high in the air. “What’s a Levite?”

Little Mario punched his bean bag chair. “Wait! So Levi left the guy too? He’s right there!”

“No, no! A *Levite!* He was a…another kind of priest. The Levites were like a whole tribe of holy men.”

Little Mario stood up, shaking his fists at the heavens. “Then why doesn’t he help him?”

Mama Mario flicked Little Mario on the side of his head, not enough to hurt him, but enough to get his attention. “Because sometimes people forget to do what they know is right. Now, sit and listen to the story!”

Little Mario sat back down with a flump, with his legs crossed in front of him. Little Mario’s face was a mix of polite interest and furious impatience.

Papa Mario sighed. “Hmmm, guy’s down for the count, Priest’s ignoring the problem, Levite’s doing likewise…But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.”

Luigi raised his hand, but before he could ask, Mama Mario said, “It’s like using antiseptic and a band-aid for a big boo-boo.”

Papa Mario nodded, and kept his focus on the book. “...Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have…Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

Mario's fist was resting on his chin, in a perfect imitation of Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker*. "The Samaritan guy?"

Papa Maro closed his book, looking pleased. "Exactly! The moral of the story is to be a Good Samaritan!"

Luigi waved his still-raised hand. "But what's a Samaritan?"

Papa Mario's eyes popped open. "What's a–? Hold on, your Mama wrote a note in the margins here…'An inhabitant of Samaria, or one that belonged to the sect which derived their appellation from that city. The Samaritans of the first century claimed to be the descendents of those ancient Israelites who were not deported from Jerusalem by the Assyrian conqueror Sargon II in 722 B.C."

By this point, Luigi had decided it was more efficient to just keep his hand raised the entire time. "So to be a Good Samaritan…we have to not get deported from Jerusalem by the Assyrian conqueror Sargon II in 722 B.C.?"

Papa slapped his book shut. "Mama Mia, help me out here!"

Mama Mario nodded. "You don't have to come from Samaria to be a Good Samaritan. The point of the story is that, in ancient times, the Samaritans and the Jews were hated enemies…Yes, Luigi?"

Mama Mario paused as she saw little Luigi's hand shoot up. "Like the Yankees and the Red Sox?"

"Even *worse* than the Yankees and the Red Sox. The Samaritans and the Jews both believed themselves to be the only true children of God. They hated each other so much, they didn't even want to touch each other. Even the word 'Samaritan' was like a slur."

Mario finally raised his own hand. "...Like when the other kids call us 'goombahs'?"

Mama Mario nodded, looking grave. "Yes, dear. Exactly like that. The people listening to that story would have been shocked. They didn't think it was possible for there to ever be a good Samaritan. But no matter who you are, or where you come from…You can choose to be the one who helps, rather than look the other way."

Little Mario nodded. "...I can be the Good Samaritan."

…

Mario crashed face-first into a second brick obstacle, which could only be the wall. As he reached out blindly with his hands, Mario felt the boiling water like a flood as it penetrated the

radiant energy of the Fire Flower, soaking into his clothing, stabbing into his skin from all sides, like a million needles. Then his hand clasped the metal surface of the warp pipe exit.

In the chamber above, a burst of hissing steam erupted from the final gray warp pipe, and Mario emerged from it, collapsing. Every inch of his exposed skin was burned to a bright pink, and with every trembling movement, he felt his whole body screaming.

He heard a weak voice, and spotted Mrs. Sushie rasping for air. “Mario, dearie?”

Mario stood, ignoring the pain, and lifted her into his arms. Mrs. Sushie shook her head. “No! Don’t mind me…The others…”

But nevertheless, Mario carried Mrs. Sushie along the dark corridor, until he found Lady Bow and scooped her up into his other arm.

Lady Bow’s eyes fluttered open. “...Señor Mario? …The flame…beware the pink flame…it is not…” But Lady Bow fainted.

Mario leapt up onto the grey stone platform, and spotted baby Watt, her radiant light burning like the sun, then flickering like a dying lightbulb. Mario took a step toward baby Watt, before he heard a familiar, monstrous roar. Mrs. Sushie leapt from Mario’s arms, landing roughly near little Watt. “Go! I’ll tend to her!”

With a curt nod, Mario set down Lady Bow, and dashed down the stone corridor toward the iron bridge, into the eerie red light.

Watt rolled onto her side to look up at Mrs. Sushie. There was a hairline crack in her spherical body, which glowed like molten glass. The air above her billowed from the radiant heat. “Auntie Su? …I have a fever…”

Mrs. Sushie pulled out her emergency mom-supply bag, and found a glass thermometer. “Poor baby, you’re burning up!”

Watt and Mrs. Sushie both flinched as they heard a roar. It was not merely the scream of any man, nor any or woman, nor was it like the roar of a wildfire. But, somehow, it was like all three.

Ignoring her own shivering, Mrs. Sushie poured cold water onto a towel, and applied it gently to Watt’s forehead. “There, there, dear. I’m here.”

…

In the underwater chamber, the billowing steam had slowed, but the water still bubbled at a steady boil. Princess Daisy, Luigi, Toadette, Goombario, Goombella, Kooper, Koops, Koopie-Koo, Bombette, Admiral Bobbery, Parakarry, Lakilester the Lakitu (formerly known as

“Spike”), Madame Flurrie, the Great Gonzales Jr., Ms. Mowz, and Vivian all huddled against the narrow ledge.

A shudder traveled through the boiling water, and they saw a stone collapse from the ceiling, plopping into the pool with a hiss. Daisy swallowed and turned to Vivian. “When you told Mario that an escape through the shadows would be risky…how risky are we talking? Near certainty of death?”

Two more pebbles crumbled from the hole left in the ceiling. Vivian seemed to be looking far away, staring at nothing. “...No, a fate far worse than death.”

As cracks formed through the ceiling above, Daisy only nodded. “Which means there’s a chance. In that case, I need you to take us to Goombaria’s shadow…please.”

Vivian arose. “Very well. But once I get you all back to safety, I’m going back to Mario.”

Goombella scoffed. “Don’t be silly! We’re going with you, of course.”

Vivian brushed her pink hair, revealing her look of surprise. “You…you really mean it?”

Goombella beamed. “Well, duh!”

Kooper slammed his fist into his open palm. “Mario’s always had our backs. Now it’s our turn to help him.”

Parakarry fixed his aviator cap. “Mario believed in me, even when I wasn’t sure I believed in myself.”

Koops fidgeted with his hoodie. “He taught me how to fight, when I thought I was too weak to fight.”

Koopie-Koo kissed Koops’ cheek. “He taught us that we can fight for those we love.”

Bombette rolled to her feet. “He saved my people from King Bom-omb…even though we Bob-omb’s weren’t exactly his best buddies in the past.”

Admiral Bobbery held Bombette. “He showed me that it’s never too late to try again.”

Madame Flurrie chuckled. “And that we’re never too old for a comeback!”

Lakilester the Lakitu pulled out his emergency-emergency-emergency sunglasses and flicked them on, with maximum coolness. “When I was stuck on being a jerk, he helped me remember who I was supposed to be.”

Gonzales Jr. pumped his fists. “He’s the undisputed champ! The Great Gonzales stood up for me, when I couldn’t stand up for myself!”

Koops rubbed his head. “Um…I seem to recall Mario saying we should let that hot dog merchant cook you up as an omlette…”

Gonzales Jr. guffawed. “And it was *hilarious!* Gonzales is such a kidder!”

Vivian turned to look at Toadette, who was busily wrapping Ms. Mowz’s injured ankle in a bandage. “What about you two? If you can’t fight, I’d better drop you off with Luigi.”

Toadette shook her head as she stood, holding up her first-aid kit. “I’m no fighter, but if anyone gets hurt, I’ll do whatever I can!”

The master mouse thief twitched her nose, then experimentally stood on her bandaged foot. “Squeak! Don’t you dare leave me behind! If I allow a hunk like Mario to leap into the jaws of death, and can’t find a way to sneak him back out, I’ll hang up my mask, and retire from my life as a thief!”

Goombella scowled. “...I think Mario would prefer that, actually.”

Ms. Mowz curled her tail into a heart. “Of course he would!”

Daisy grinned. “Then that settles it! Just give me a chance to drop off Luigi, and we’re all going straight to Mario! Guy’s a tank, but even he needs back up.”

Goombario glanced at Luigi’s prone form. “Uh, does backtracking give the Shadow Queen more time to catch us? Maybe it’s less risky just to go straight to Mario.”

Vivian shook her head. “There is no time in the shadows. We take the risk simply by choosing to enter there in the first place.”

Daisy nodded. “So a drop off for Luigi is no problem?”

“So long as the Shadow Queen isn’t waiting for us there, and so long as one of us has a strong connection to Goombaria…Goombario, how much would you say you love your little sister?”

Goombario blushed as he realized he was being put on the spot. “...More than life itself.”

With a shudder, the cracks spread down the walls, and through the floor. Vivian held out her hands. “Then let’s go.”

…

Bowser gently cradled Peach's head in his/her hands, and found blood on his/her palms. Peach's blood.

Then Bowser saw Peach's lips move as she murmured. "...Mario…"

Peach faded away. Somehow, Bowser sensed that her heartbeat was slowing. He didn't know how he knew this. He only knew that it was true.

Then Bowser heard something approaching from behind, and spun around. "Mario?"

Mario stumbled into the room, every inch of his body screaming in pain with every step. As he looked up, he saw Bowser hovering over Peach's prone body. It was as if Peach was resting in a perfect sleep.

But something was wrong. Bowser's face was pale, his hair shining gold, as bright as the sun. There was a tiny patch of skin around Bowser's left eye that was different from the rest: a dark golden brown, and Bowser's left eye shone red, in sharp contrast to the icy blue of his right eye. "Mario! You did this!"

Bowser strode forward, pink flames engulfing most of his body. A single tear appeared in his left eye, and spilled down his cheek. "You've killed my dream!"

With a wail of anguish, Bowser erupted in red and pink flame, which smashed through the ceiling and rocketed into the sky above. Mario shielded his eyes, and as the blinding light dimmed, he saw that Bowser was engulfed in red flame on his left side, pink flames on the right.

Bowser's red and gold hair billowed on either side of his/her face, and the final tear from his red eye evaporated. "I'll kill you!"

…

In the silence of the shadows, Vivian held aloft a flame with one hand, while Daisy held onto her free hand. Luigi still lay collapsed over her shoulder, while the rest of the party clung to Daisy's legs.

Goombario sat on Vivian's shoulder, concentrating on Goombaria. He mostly remembered years of daily teasing and tattling on one another. But one memory stood out: the day Goombaria had come charging into the house, claiming that a man had fallen out of the sky and crashed-landed in the family's flower garden. And not just any man, but the legendary champion of the Mushroom Kingdom: Sir Mario of Brooklyn. Goombario remembered helping Goompapa and Goomama nurse Mario back to health, running to do whatever chores or errands they asked of him. He remembered Grandpa Goompa asking Mario to take young Goombario along with him, to give Goombario a chance to become a man. He remembered kissing Goombaria goodbye.

Goombaria's shadow appeared before them, and Vivian pointed them toward it. Goombario wanted to cheer, but heard no sound escape his throat. Then, long, shadowy hands erupted from the outline of Goombaria's shadow, and flew toward them. Vivian held up her flame, and her thoughts echoed through the infinite shadow. "The hands of the Shadow Queen! It's a trap!"

Goombario remembered his promise to come back home, safe and sound, and the first wave of shadow hands erupted in white flames, only to be replaced by a second wave, and a third, coming from all sides.

Vivian spun, her flame twisting and exploding like a firework, a thousand sparks each ripping through a thousand of the Shadow Queen's hands. *"No good! Only one hope!"*

Vivian turned, and Daisy nodded. Mario's shadow appeared in the distance, and they all flew toward it.

[End of Chapter XIX]

Bowsette's Princess Lessons
Chapter XVII: Race to the Finish

Bowser counted on his slender, five-fingered hand as he emerged from the gray warp pipe, with Peach laying perfectly still over his shoulder. "Okay, this has *gotta* be the last leg of the maze. Running just traps me in a loop here…so it's gotta be a warp pipe!"

Peeking curiously down the first pipe he approached, Bowser flinched as a Piranha Plant snapped at his nose, then shot a fire ball with his free hand to incinerate it. "Eeek! Rude! So if that was just a Piranha Plant pot which resembles a warp pipe…then this next one must be the real warp pipe!"

As Bowser leapt atop the second gray pipe, it glowed with the colors of the rainbow, and he and Peach were sucked down into the warp. "Yes! Nailed it! See, Peach, that's how you design an evil–"

With a boop, Bowser and Peach emerged from the grey warp pipe…at the start of the entire maze. "...labyrinth?"

Bowser yanked at his blood-red hair. "Graarh! We're back at square one? …Peach, would you happen to have a pencil and paper on you?"

Peach pretended to fumble through her fanny pack, pulled out a pen and legal notepad, then shrugged as she stuffed them back in. "Nope! Sorry, no pencil!"

"Oogh! Whatever, I have this first chunk of the maze memorized anyway…Don't take the first pipe, that just takes you back to the first, first pipe."

Peach presses a finger against her luscious lips. "Hmmm, wouldn't it be better to call it the *second* pipe, so you don't mix it up with the first, first pipe?"

"No, the second pipe is…Hey, cut that out! I'm trying to concentrate! We jump *over* the lava, and take the second pipe…" Bowser hopped down the warp pipe and emerged in the second section of the maze. "...to the second-first pipe!

"See, that's my point, it's your naming conventions. You should use a lettering system, like Section-A Pipe #1, Section-A Pipe #2, Section-B Pipe #1, Section B Pipe #2–"

Bowser stared at his fingers, twitching them up and down to represent the different pipes ahead of them. "No, no no! You're gonna get me mixed up on the sections again! Maze sections are divided according to magical, infinite-floor-trap triggers, not warp Pipes! Now…starting from the second-first pipe, I'm remembering something about the second-second pipe. Crud! Is second-second pipe good or bad?"

“Wait, if you called the first pipe the first-first pipe, wouldn’t that make this one the second-first-first pipe?”

Bowser used his pink flames to fly over the two pipes that were causing him trouble. “No, no, first pipe is bad! My system makes perfect sense! Second-second pipe is…wait, you’re right, this one should be second-first-first pipe, so that makes this one second-first pipe, and this one one second-second pipe–”

“Ah, so that’s the one you want!”

Nodding, Bowser landed on the second-second pipe and sank down it, smirking at Peach’s upturned backside. “Exactly! Wow, thanks Peach-blossom, you’ve been a big–”

With a poof, they appeared at the start of the maze again. “–help?”

Peach held both her hands to her face in horror. “Oh nooooo! Did we mess up again?”

Bowser reared back his head, snarling. “Mrrraaaugh! Second-second pipe is bad! How’d I forget to–

Slowly, Bowser turned his head to stare at Peach’s rear end. “Wait a second…Peach…you’re not stupid.”

Peach swallowed, before using her most charming Princess voice. “Why, that’s such a lovely thing to say, Bowser. You know, they teach a whole course on the art of the delicate compliment at Princess Academy! For example–”

Smoke billowed from Bowser’s nostrils. “Nice try, tutz. I know what you’re up to. You’re stalling for time, hoping for that toilet-scrubbing–”

Bowser saw a fireball shoot above their heads and crash onto the floor ahead, and turned to spot Mario diving after them from the ledge above the start of the labyrinth.

Bowser’s eyes shone red, and with a blast of pink flame he shot up and away from his hated enemy. “–Mario?”

Peach reached for Mario. “Mario! Take the warp pipes *after* jumping over the lava pits! Lava, then pipe!”

Bowser twisted in mid air to rocket over the first section of lava, then blasted toward the first pipe he saw. “After the–lava? Peach, you brat! You knew the trick the whole time? That does it, as soon as we get home, I’m going to spank–” Bowser and Peach disappeared down the warp pipe.

Mario called over his shoulder to his friends as he sprinted and jumped off the red steel platform floating on the lava pit. “Follow me!”

Mario dove down the warp pipe after Bowser and Peach, followed by the rest of his party, with Princess Daisy bringing up the rear, using the fireman's carry to haul the unconscious Luigi over her shoulders. A shudder traveled through the floor of the fortress. A single stone tile glitched, then fell away into nothingness.

…

Bowser emerged from the warp pipe in the second section, and blasted into the air with a burst of pink flames. “Lava! Then! Pipe!”

Spiraling in mid air, Bowser kicked pink flames to torch the Piranha Plant that pounced at him from within the correct warp pipe, which hovered in mid-air on a floating platform. The maneuver forced him to adjust his grip on Peach, so that instead of dangling bottoms-up over his shoulder, he now held her in an almost-tender embrace. “Lava! Then! Pipe!”

Bowser caught a brief glimpse of Mario emerging from the previous warp pipe, blasting fireballs at the enemy Parakoopas, before Bowser and Peach were whisked away.

Peach beat her fists uselessly against Bowser’s chest, but all she managed to achieve was to make Bowser’s new breasts jiggle. “Bowser! Please, stop!”

Ignoring Peach. Bowser focused the warp zone exit shining above him, already charging his pink flame in one hand. “Lava…then…”

The second they emerged out the other end of the warp pipe, Bowser rocketed them into the air, and spotted the lava pit. “Pipe!”

Then Bowser saw a purple Cheep-Cheep with an orange mohawk diving towards his face, making a fishy-face. As the Cheep-Cheep latched onto Bowser’s head, it started kissing him madly. Bowser twisted in midair, shielding Peach in his arms, before all three of them flew over the lava pit and crashed against the next warp pipe. Bowser shook his head like a dog to tear his lips free of the Cheep-Cheep, which bounced once and rolled dangerously close to the edge of the ledge.

Bowser arose, gagging, still cradling Peach like a small child against his breast. “Gaahg-fft!! Who the hell are–”

Peach’s face lit up as she recognized the Cheep-Cheep. “Mrs. Sushie!”

Bowser lifted a hand, and a pink fireball hovered in front of his palm. “Yeah, well if you don’t want to be Mrs. Grilled-Sushi, then stay back!”

Mrs. Sushie shielded her eyes against the bright flame with her fins. “Oooh, shame on you, young man! Why, I’ve a good mind to take you right across my knee and spank your bottom, little mister!”

Still holding up the flame to keep the furious fish at bay, Bowser hopped onto the gray pipe and sneered. “That’s sexist.”

Bowser and Peach fell down the warp pipe, and emerged in a dimly-lit room of glittering, sea-green stones, connected to a water-filled tunnel. Peach held her breath as Bowser carried them into the pool with a swan-dive. Bowser’s cheeks were puffed up as he held his breath. Peach forced her eyes open, and could make out a glowing purple warp pipe, labeled “Secret Entrance to the Mushroom Kingdom Royal Moat.”

Of course! That was how Mrs. Sushie had found them. If only Peach could reach it…

Mrs. Sushie splashed down into the watery chamber from above, then swam at Bowser. Bowser kicked away, and for a moment, pink flames burst from both his feet, creating an explosion of boiling bubbles before they were quickly extinguished.

Mrs. Sushie slammed into Bowser’s stomach, and he lost his mouthful of air. Bowser felt a pink flame die on his tongue as Mrs. Sushie slapped his face with her tail fin, desperately trying to shove Peach free from his grip. Peach managed to free herself from one of Bowser’s arms, and tugged to pull her trapped wrist from his powerful grip. As Mrs. Sushie swam a tight circle around Bowser, he tried to aim his fire breath at her, only to see boiling bubbles blurring his vision. Mrs. Sushie shot like a bullet, crashing down on his head from above, digging the crown deeper into his skull. Bowser spasmed, his movements slowed by the surrounding water. This wasn’t working! This stupid pink fire…it *tasted* all wrong.

There was a muffled splash as Mario dove into the water. Peach noticed, and reached toward Mario, still caught by one arm. Mrs. Sushie slammed against Bowser’s back from behind.

Then, as Bowser saw Mario, and saw Peach’s face as she looked at Mario, something clicked. As water filled Bowser’s lungs, Bowser pulled Peach tight against his chest. He tried to scream, “Maaarioooo!” but all that came out was a stream of bubbles…followed by a full, red flame.

Sensing something was coming, Mario swam to reach the ceiling, before a pillar of red fire ripped through the water. As 100,000 gallons of water were instantly boiled to steam, the sheer force sent a shockwave through the pool that knocked Mario into the stone wall on the other side.

The red fire tore through the purple warp pipe, melting it to slag, and Bowser, Peach, and Mrs. Sushie shot backwards across the entire length of the pool, crashing into the exit pipe on the opposite side. Mrs. Sushie took the brunt of the impact as they slammed to a halt, and floated

limply. Peach finally tore herself free from Bowser's grip and grabbed Mrs. Sushie, but as Peach turned, she knew there was no hope of escape. Bowser kicked away from the exit, his roar audible even under water as he charged a second shot of fiery breath. The entire underwater chamber had already begun to boil. Peach turned to the exit pipe and carried Mrs. Sushie through it.

As Bowser aimed his second breath attack at Mario, he saw two Koopas dive into the water and lift Mario up under his arms from either side. As his lungs screamed for air, Bowser screamed Mario's name again, and a second pillar of red fire ripped through the already boiling water.

Kooper and Koops felt their turtle shells starting to cook as they shot up and out of the water, carrying Mario along with them.

…

Just as Koops and Kooper emerged out of the water, Lady Bow floated toward the boiling pool and dove in, turning transparent as she disappeared in the billowing steam.

Fighting for air, Mario immediately stood up and tried to shove past both Koopas to chase after Lady Bow. Koops stammered as he tried to hold Mario back. "M-Mario? G-get a grip!"

Kooper shook his head. "It's no use! You'll never–"

Mario shook both of the Koopas off him, and leapt for the pool. He would have dove straight back in if Madame Flurrie hadn't intervened, letting him crash into her massive, sumo-wrestler-sized belly.

Mario didn't just feel the heat of the boiling steam. He physically felt it slam against his face like a solid punch as a pillar of steam erupted from the narrow pit that led to the underwater pathway.

Madame Flurrie puffed her cheeks to create a cold front of icy wind, which was barely enough to shield them as steam filled the room, the warp pipe above acting as the only exhaust.

…

Peach emerged from the warp pipe carrying Mrs. Sushie. Coughing up water, Peach glanced at the pipe she had come from, and saw a painted message that read "One-Way" with an icon of an arrow pointing up. Mrs. Sushie took a shaky breath, then went limp in Peach's arms.

Stumbling toward the next pipe ahead, Peach examined it, but as she peered down, she saw the warp zone within was beginning to glitch and dissipate. "World 8-4 is falling apart. No going back…"

Peach glanced up, and saw a red glow ahead. She knew it was a final lava pit, and beyond the ledge, the rope bridge that led to the exit. “...The only way out is through.”

Bowser shot up out of the warp pipe, then slumped forward, landing face-first on the stone floor. “Woo! Sweet, sweet air! Man, do I *hate* underwater levels!”

Lifting his face, Bowser spotted Peach. “...Hello, beautiful!”

Peach shook her head. She tried to think of an argument, a plea, but at the moment, she was too terrified, and a moment was all Bowser needed to snatch her by the waist.

…

As Mario strained against his friends to reach the boiling pool, Princess Daisy hooked Mario around his chest and pulled him back, still carrying Luigi’s slumped form over her back with one arm. “Mario? Cool it! That’s boiling water!”

Mario rounded on them, his eyes blazing. “No! I had them!”

Daisy slapped Mario across his face. Mario froze, and felt the tingling spot on his cheek, not quite believing what he’d just felt.

Tears appeared in Daisy’s eyes as she adjusted her grip on Luigi to cradle him. “Cut it out! I need you to think! We *all* need you to think! So quit hot dogging, and think of a plan that *doesn’t* involve getting boiled alive!”

Mario was so surprised by Daisy’s slap, it snapped him out of his hot temper. “...You’re right. Lady Bow’s gone ahead. She must have realized she was the only one who possibly could survive that, if she ghosted across…so in that case…”

Mario turned to Vivian. “...We’ll travel through the shadows. Vivian, please take me to Peach’s shadow.”

Vivian rested her hand against Mario’s shadow and shook her head. “No good. Peach isn’t connected to her shadow.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Toadette, are there any hidden paths around the pool?”

Toadette shook her head. “It’s the only route. It’s about 128 meters in length.”

As the room above the pool rose to the temperature of a sauna, Mario started to sweat bullets. “Goombario, Goombella, any chance we can survive that swim?”

Goombario swallowed as he did some quick math in his head. “World record for a 50 meter swim is about 20 seconds, so that’s at least 50 seconds swimming through boiling water.”

Goombella shook her head. “And if that doesn’t kill us outright, we’d be in no position to fight once we reach the other side.”

Mario glanced at the boiling pool. “Then there’s no choice.”

Mario twisted his hand and produced a fireball.

Daisy growled like a cat. “Mrrah! So you *are* gonna swim across a boiling lake?”

Mario shook his head. “You were right, Daisy. If I had tried that while Bowser was waiting for me, he’d have incinerated me. But thanks to the Fire Flower, my clothes are fire-resistant.”

Goombella bared her fangs. “Yeah, fire-resistant, not fireproof!”

“I’m not hot dogging this time…I’m the only one who has a chance of reaching them.”

They all went silent as they saw the truth of their situation. Princess Daisy glanced once at Luigi’s unconscious form slumped against her, and gave Mario a curt nod.

But Vivian clung to Mario’s sleeve. “I won’t leave you again! …If I hide in your shadow…”

Vivian trailed off as she saw the flaw in her own plan. Mario gently pulled Vivian’s hand away from his sleeve, holding her hand in his. “Can you get the others out of here, Vivian? Maybe if you take them to Goombaria’s shadow, back at the castle?”

Vivian’s lip quivered. “I…I hadn’t thought of that…but it’s risky. The shadows are treacherous here.”

A tremor passed through the ground. Mario squeezed Vivian’s hand. “Then wait as long as you can. If there’s no other way, I’m counting on you to save my friends, to save my brother…”

As Mario released his hold on Vivian’s hand, he looked up to see the faces of all his gathered friends, taking a final deep breath. “And if I fail, I’m counting on you all to help Peach…There’s nothing you can’t do, if you all hang together. Good luck, my friends...Arrivederci!”

With that, Mario turned and dove headfirst into the bubbling, steaming pool. The moment he broke the surface, he felt the heat pressing in on him from all sides. Boiling water seeped into

the gaps of his gloves, and down the collar of his shirt. Every square inch of exposed skin screamed at him in protest, but he shut his eyes tight and swam forward.

Sure enough, he felt the power of the fire flower like a thin envelope surrounding his body, just barely pushing back the external heat. But it was like holding onto white-hot metal with oven mitts. With every second that passed, Mario felt the heat press slowly, but surely, through the protective layer.

As he pressed blindly forward, Mario knew that if this didn't work, if he couldn't find his way past the obstacles, if the fire flower didn't hold back the water long enough, he would die in agony, having accomplished nothing. But his mind was calm. The only way out was through.

Bowsette's Princess Lessons
Chapter XVIII: Strange Fire

Bowser huffed as he hauled Princess Peach up onto his shoulder. "Alley oop! …Phew, you've really gotta lay off the cake. It all goes right to your–"

As Bowser turned, a snarling spectre leapt at his face out of nowhere and slapped him across his face. "Grreeaah!"

Bowser squealed like a girl and spun in a circle. "Aaaiieeek! Where did–"

Peach caught a quick glimpse and recognized the ghost: it was Lady Bow! Then Bowser finished turning on his heels to face this enemy, and saw Lady Bow flourish two ornate fans in her hands. "Boo!"

Lady Bow waved her fans in front of her, and as she did, she vanished. Bowser felt a chill travel up his spine, and twisted. Lady Bow appeared at his side and struck him with her fan. "Olé!"

As Bowser reeled from the blow, Lady Bow appeared on his opposite side and struck again with her other fan. "Olé!"

Bowser released a quick blast of his fiery breath, covering a wide angle. Over his shoulder Peach squeaked as she felt the fire come dangerously close to burning the seat of her skirt. "Eek! Bowser! Cut it out!"

Bowser snapped his mouth shut with a snap. "Shoot! You okay, Peach-pumpkin? Wait, how do I fight her with–"

Bowser felt a little ghost hand under his chin, before Lady Boo appeared in his face and smacked his face multiple times in quick succession. "Olé Olé Olé Olé Olé Olé Olé Olé!"

Incidentally, Lady Bow was a huge fan of *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*.

Bowser tried to blast her away with fire breath, only to hesitate and swallow the red fire at the last possible moment. As he swung wildly for Lady Bow, she disappeared before his eyes. "Hey! No fair!"

Lady Bow appeared on Bowser's opposite side, using the handle of her fan like a dagger to jab him in the gut. "Fair?"

Bowser swung a claw at her, and Lady Bow disappeared with a flourish of her fans, reappearing again to smack him across the back of his head, Lady Bow's fan glancing of the crown as she swung with all her might. "You dare to speak of fair?"

Lady Bow disappeared from behind Bowser, then appeared in front of him, striking with the fan again. “You *toro!* You unleashed that monster Tubba Blubba on my pueblo!”

Without thinking, Bowser swung his free arm and blasted a pink fireball at Lady Bow. Instead of disappearing, Lady Bow pirouetted out of the way, still visible. Spotting an opening, Bowser charged to land a wild haymaker.

Charging a red fireball in his fist, Bowser’s punched a hole into the brick wall where Lady Bow had been a moment before, leaving scorch marks behind. “Aw! Gimme’ a break!”

As Bowser felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end, he knew Lady Bow was about to sneak up on him and spun to blast another red ball of fire. Lady Bow shrieked and dropped one of her fans to shield her eyes. As Bowser shot the fireball, Lady Bow spun out of the way, so narrowly, that one of the ribbons of her red hair bows caught on fire. Sneering, Bowser aimed a knife hand strike at Lady Bow and his red fire cut through the air like a sickle. “He was *way* too good a minion to pass up.”

Lady Bow rolled in midair to evade the cutting blade of red fire. Bowser lunged forward to snatch the ghost out of the air, but she spun to disappear from his grasp. Bowser’s smile widened to a full grin. “Cutting out your heart to achieve invincibility? Now that’s showing initiative! …Too bad it didn’t quite work, but still–”

Spinning to look behind him, Bowser spotted Lady Bow coming in for another strike with her fan, and blocked it.

Bowser smacked Lady Bow to the ground with a flick of his wrist, red fire dancing on the palm of his hand. Lady Bow bounced once on the ground, and looked up, her face singed. “...He *ate* my neighbors alive!”

Bowser shrugged. “Eh, you’re ghosts. I don’t think it counts as killing you if you’re already dead to begin with. Now, it’s been lovely doing the fandango with you, but I’m saving the last dance for my date. So if you’ll excuse me–”

“No! I will not allow it! If you plan to abduct Peach, you will have to step over my dead body!”

Bowser held up his free hand, palm pointing outwards. “Let’s test that theory.”

A steady stream of red flame poured out of Bowser’s palm. An instant before it engulfed Lady Bow, she shielded her face and turned semi-transparent. Peach slapped the back of Bowser’s turtle shell to get his attention. “Bowser! Don’t hurt her!”

Bowser craned his neck toward Peach as he kept shooting red flames to hold down Lady Bow. “Relax! She can’t move while I’m doing this. All right, Chica, as fun as it is to bully you nerds, I’m in a rush, so kindly–”

A pink bullet of fire shot out of Bowser's open palm, ripping a hole through the thick, red flames. Bowser's arm flailed in the air as he felt the recoil. Lady Bow held her breath as the pink flame passed right through her. Lady Bow felt no pain. After all, as long as she held still, Lady Bow was intangible, so the pink flame was *supposed* to go right through her.

Then Lady Bow saw a small, burning hole had been cut in her fan, and felt a thin prick, like a sewing needle, pressing into her chest. And as Lady Bow looked down, she finally saw a thin tongue of pink flame, flickering from a wound in her breast. "What…sorcery…"

Lady Bow collapsed. Behind her, a small hole had been burned through the stone.

Bowser examined his palm. "Huh?"

Peach yelled. "What did you do?"

Bowser grinned sheepishly. "Uh, I'm sure she's fine. Boos are hard to kill, even on purpose."

As Bowser turned to progress down the chamber, Peach spotted Lady Bow as they left her behind. "Lady Bow! Oh, Bowser, what have you done to her?"

"It was self defense!"

"It's *not* self defense if *you* start the fight!"

Bowser whined as he charged red flames from his feet, preparing to lift off. "But *she* started it! Why do you always have to root for the little guy?"

With a blast of flame, Bowser took off, flying over the lava pit, and toward the ledge that led to the final bridge, and their escape. "Can't you see, I'm trying to save–"

A little baby Sparky burst out of the lava, her lollipop flying out of her mouth as she hollered a war cry in an adorable, childish lisp. "Pika-Pikaaaa!"

Watt the Sparky slammed against Bowser's bottom, and unleashed a devastating electric shock that electrocuted both Bowser and Princess Peach. Sparky roared like thunder, releasing a shock wave."Goro-goro!"

The blast sent Bowser flying forward, leaving a trail of steam behind him. Shielding Peach in his arms, Bowser came rolling to a halt on the steel and chain-link bridge that led to the exit.

Watt bounced forward, looking thoroughly proud of herself. "Gotcha! Mr. Mario told me to stop you, and I did it! Now, Mr. Bowser…stop being a bad guy!"

Bowser shivered as he saw Peach's prone form in her arms, then rounded on Watt, his nostrils billowing smoke. "You lil' brat! You hurt *my* Peach!"

Watt noticed Peach. "Huh? Ms. Peach, why are you with Bowser?"

Peach groaned. "I'm fine. Please, Bowser, just listen to–"

Flakes of ember flew from Bowser's mouth like spit. "You *HURT* her! Rrraaawwwrrr!"

With a deep, low boom, a pillar of red fire shot from Bowser's mouth. Watt tried to leap up and out of the way, but Bower angled the shot up and caught Watt with the full force of the attack. It slammed Watt into the ceiling with such force, it cracked the stones and left a glowing, white-hot crater behind. Watt fell limply from the ceiling, bounced on the floor, and came rolling to a halt against the wall.

Peach screamed, dashing forward to reach the baby Sparky. "Lil' Watt!"

But Bowser caught her around her waist. "Let's go, Peaches, I've gotta get you out of–"

Peach rounded on Bowser and struck him full across the face. "You beast! How could you hurt her?"

Ordinarily, a slap from Peach wouldn't even phase Bowser, but in his feminine form, he actually felt it. Bowser nearly lost his grip on Peach, before remembering to use both hands. "But that thing hurt *you!* It attacked me!"

"She's a *CHILD!!"*

Peach tried to pull her wrist free away from Bowser, then turned to look for Watt. The Lil' Sparky's body was billowing, glowing white like hot molten glass. Watt rolled onto her side to look up at Peach. "Miss Peach…I don't feel so good…"

Boser hooked Peach around her chest to pull her into a tight grapple. "...There, see? She's fine. Lil' Sparkys are built tough."

Peach spun to face Bowser, grabbed the sash on his shredded dress, and slapped him three times. "Excuses! Excuses! Always excuses! You hurt people, and then you pretend it doesn't matter!"

Bowser flinched as he felt the slaps, but kept his hold on Peach, picking her up and spinning to carry her toward the exit. "Okay, okay, I'm sorry! Shesh, I wasn't trying to hurt her."

With the power of a red mushroom, Bowser was strong enough to carry Peach, even in his female form…but he wasn't quite as strong as he used to be. Peach twisted her grip on

Bowser's sash to gain leverage, and strained to push away from Bowser, forcing him to release her as he stumbled forward. Peach leapt back to give herself distance, holding her hands up defensively. "Then *stop* hurting my friends!"

Bowser caught himself on the chain link that acted as the suspension for the rickety bridge. "Careful! We're over lava!"

"Careful? You broke the Super Mario Maker! You've put all my friend's lives at risk!"

"How was I supposed to know? You're the one who programmed it! You should have put in more safety features."

"And *you* should have listened to me when I told you to stop! My friends are in danger! They need our help! But you only care about yourself!"

Bowser bared his fangs. "That's not true! I care about *you*, Peach. I love you!"

"No you don't! If you really loved me, you'd stop treating me this way! You'd let me live my life!"

Bowser rolled his eyes. "Oh, spare me, Peach. You're telling me you want to sit in your palace all day? Eating cakes? Attending stuffy royal functions? I know you too well. You crave adventure! The thrills, the romance! I see that big, goofy smile on your face everytime Mario shows up to kidnap you from me! You *love* being kidnapped! That's why you *pretend* to like that Mario guy: to make me jealous, so I enact a daring plan to rescue you from him."

Peach faltered. Bowser was so wildly wrong, and yet so strangely observant, she nearly lost her train of thought. "I don't–I don't *pretend* to like Mario! He's my friend!"

"Yeah, yeah, short, fat, funny-looking, low-class, low-income–pretty scrappy, I'll give him that–but definitely not in your league. Ya know I used to feel threatened by him, but then I got to thinking, if you really loved Mario, you'd have just married the poor schmuck years ago. But you *haven't* married Mario, because you *don't* love him, because you're waiting for a *real* man to show up, and sweep you off your feet! And that's me, of course!"

Peach stammered. "But…But…"

She had started to say the same words she had said, time and again: "But I don't love you, Bowser!"

But she didn't say those words. Instead, Peach said the first thing that came to mind. "But…but I *do* love Mario."

Bowser's smile disappeared. A lock of hair fell out of place, shimmering as it caught the ambient red light. "What?"

A tremor traveled through the floor, sending the steel bridge swaying slightly. A bubble burst in the lava below. Bowser's face turned suddenly pale. "There's no time for arguments. Your life is more important than anything, Princess."

Peach snarled, then raised her fists, remembering Princess Daisy's boxing classes. "No! I refuse to be bullied! Bower, you…you bucket-head! Put up yer' dukes!"

Before he could react, Bowser felt his mouth moving. "To what end? So that you can die here? And what of your kingdom? What of your people? Would you throw your life away, and leave them without a protector?"

Peach's fists trembled, her eyes suddenly doubtful. "I…I won't–"

Bowser was no less surprised than Peach by his own argument. As he felt the words flow, he recognized them as his own thoughts, his own observations, but ones he could never articulate before this moment. "Your father is old, and feeble, and has failed to produce a male heir. The Mushroom Kingdom *must always* have a rightful king. Do you understand what that means? You will be Queen Toadstool, but only by right of primogeniture…Your first-born son will be the King of the Mushroom Kingdom. You have no choice!"

Peach felt her breath falter. "I…I've always wanted to be a mother, ever since I was a little girl. That *is* my choice!"

Bowser's eyes shimmered like blue ice, in sharp contrast to the warm ambient that radiated from the lava below, holding up his/her hand, almost gently. "Then you must live, no matter the cost. Come with me, Crown Princess Toadstool."

Peach saw the reflection of her own face on the golden surface of Bowser's crown, and something about it frightened her, more than even Bowser himself. "...No…If you cross that line, it will be the death of the others…Those *are* my people! I will not let you!"

With a flick of the wrist, Bowser created a quick flash of pink flame in his/her open palm. As Peach recoiled from the blinding light, Bowser charged to tackle her.

…

In the underwater chamber, Mario felt a stone obstacle blocking his path, then swam upwards. He tried to peek a glimpse of the warp pipe that was his only exit, and felt boiling water pressing against his eyes. No good. At least two more obstacles blocking his path. The protective power of the Fire Flower was overwhelmed. Mario used a freestyle stroke to propel forward, then switched to a kick stroke to aim downward at where he could only guess the pipe would be. The only thing keeping him from screaming was the knowledge that, as soon as he opened his

mouth, boiling water would fill his lungs. Behind his closed eyelids, red and white stars filled Mario's vision…

…

As Peach struggled to see past the blinding light, Bowser lifted her up in a bear hug and began to carry her, step by step, toward the finish line. Peach slammed her fist into Bowser's face.

Bowser flinched, holding Peach tighter against his/her breast. "There's no point. You lack the strength to hurt me."

But as Bowser tried to secure his/her grip, Peach used the momentum to kick up her heels and shove herself out of Bowser's grip. Peach tumbled hard on her rear end and back, but managed to break her fall.

Bowser stumbled back, grabbing the chain link for balance, then thrust forward, snatching Peach's wrist and pulling her up as she struggled to regain her footing. "Enough of this!"

Peach aimed an elbow strike at Bowser's head, then tried to hook her arm around her foe's neck, hoping to pull Bowser off balance. But instead Peach caught the Crown of Queen Toadstool in a tight grip. Without thinking, Peach wrenched at the Crown, slamming her other hand into Bowser's jaw to secure her judo hold, but as long as Bowser had the power of both a Red Mushroom and a Fire Flower, it was as if Peach was hitting solid concrete.

As Peach twisted at the Crown, Bowser felt like he had sharp fangs digging into his skull, and reared to shake Peach loose. "Aauurgh! Get *OFF* my *HEAD!!"*

Bowser was overwhelmingly stronger than Peach. He was used to being ridiculously stronger than Peach. But without his old body, Bowser was just *slightly* weaker than he used to be, even with the magic power of the Red Mushroom. So when Bowser felt something hurting him, something he couldn't shake off he panicked, and used his full strength. Bowser shoved Peach away, sending her flying back, almost slowly, towards the stone steps that led to the exit.

As Princess Peach crashed down backwards against the step, there was an ugly crack of bone against stone. Bowser froze, and even as the radiant heat of molten lava billowed around him, he felt only ice in his veins.

His hands shook as he reached for Peach. "Peaches?"

An older woman's voice screamed in his ears. *"Take her!"*

Bowser stumbled as he sought the source of the voice, which seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, then spotted the great, gilded war axe that hung over his old throne room. On the

surface of the axe blade, he saw his own reflection…but it was also Peach…and it also neither of them. *“Quickly! To the exit! You’re her only hope! She is MY only hope!”*

Bowser hugged himself. “You were in my dream! This is just a dream! This isn’t happening!”

“This is your victory! There’s nothing left to stop you! But reach out your hand, and she is yours! Her Kingdom is yours! This is what you wanted! Kill Mario! Claim Peach as your prize!”

Bowser ran his fingers through his hair, his head swimming as his vivid, red-gold locks blurred his vision. “...Kill Mario? …Save Peach? No! Not like this! This isn’t my dream! I have to beat Mario, fair and square. Peach has to watch me win the fight, and tell me how cool I looked. I need them to know…I need to know…that I was always the bigger man!”

“...Then you leave me no choice.”

Bowser twisted to look away at the horrible reflection of his own face, and found himself standing in an infinite, black void. He was alone.

A blaring stage light activated, illuminating a single, white King-Koopa egg, resting on a nest.

Then, Bowser saw himself, outside of himself. Feeling small, Bowser looked up to find a much younger version of Bowser Koopa, in his good, old turtle form, resting a claw gently on the egg. “Well, congrats, Claudia, you got shared custody. We’ll be seeing an awful lot of each other for forever now.”

They were in Bowser and Morton’s childhood home, which Claudia had fought tooth and nail to claim for herself, despite having always hated the place. “I think I can stomach seeing you pick up Junior once a week…watching have to drop him off makes it all worth it!”

Bowser Koopa didn’t bother to look up as he meticulously fiddled with the incubator, and examined the manual.

Claudia sniffed. “You know, Warty and I *were* going to spend the week together at Sirena Beach.”

Bowser Koopa scowled as he attached the egg-care manual to the refrigerator. “Well, too bad. It’s not my fault you didn’t bother to read the calendar.”

Claudia crossed her arms. “You *could* have taken Junior for another week. Not like you had any plans.”

Bowser Koopa sneered, then pumped a fist. “As a matter of fact, I *do!* For months, my spies have been constructing a massive flying fortress underneath Princess Peach’s castle, so that I

may carry her off on a romantic getaway through the heavens! Do you have any idea of the logistics involved? It's a triumph of modern Koopa engineering."

Claudia pulled a file from her purse to give her claws a manicure. "Oh, still chasing after that poisonous bimbo? You know what I like about Warty? He sets achievable goals, and then he meets them. He has *actual* ambition."

Bowser Koopa gestured to the heavens as he entered into his villain-monologue mode. "To *achieve* my goals…I plan to assault the Star Haven, and seize the Star Rod for myself. With its all-mighty power, I shall become immortal and rule the world. All my wishes shall finally be granted!"

"Daddy?"

Bowser turned as he heard the childish voice, and as he did, Bowser looked at his pale hands, Bowser remembered that he was small and weak. He was not the same as the young Bowser Koopa that towered over him.

Little Larry "Cheatsy" Koopa appeared in the doorway, and Bowser saw he was at a height with the Koopaling. Larry roared with joy and ran *through* Bowser's ghostly spirit to cling to the leg of the mighty Bowser Koopa. "Daddy! You're finally home!"

Six more children darted into the room, with more cries of, "Daddy? Daddy! Daddy's home!" Morton "Big Mouth" Koopa Jr. (no relation to Bowser's twin Morton C. Koopa), clutched an American football. Wendy Koopa threw aside a glammy fashion magazine. Iggy "Hop" Koopa held up a toy race car made of N&B blocks (the favored alternative to Legos in the Mushroom Kingdom). Roy "Bully" Koopa accidentally knocked Larry aside as he vied for Bowser Koopa's attention.

Lemmy "Hip" Koopa smiled, his lazy eye making his childish joy look almost comical. "Are you gonna' stay forever?"

Ludwig Koopa shoved Lemmy aside, holding up blank sheet music covered in pencil marks. "Dad? Check it! I wrote a cool new theme song for you!"

Bowser Koopa stiffened. "Aw, crud! Claudia, why are your kids here? I thought you put them in boarding school?"

Claudia shrugged. "I can't keep up with all these new holidays."

Larry grabbed at Bowser Koopa's other ankle. "We missed you, Daddy! Stay with us!"

Bowser Koopa shook his head, and tried to step over the mob of children to reach the door. "No, no, no! Crud, this was only supposed to be a quick drop-off. Claudia, did you plan this?"

Claudia grinned as she examined her nails. “...Maybe!”

All the Koopalings howled with despair as they realized Bowser Koopa was leaving.

Larry wailed. “No! Don’t leave!”

Morton back and forth looked from Bowser Koopa to his siblings. “What’s happening?”

Iggy tossed aside his toy block car. “Boarding school is awful!”

Ludwig dropped his sheet music. “It’s stifling my creativity!”

Roy fidgeted with his sunglasses. “Yeah, they even bully *me* there!”

Lemmy clung to Bowser Koopa’s leg. “It is ‘cuz we screwed up fighting Mario? We’ll get him next time, Daddy, I promise!”

Bowser Koopa looked back and forth at his adopted step-children, his eyes wide. “No, no, no, Daddy’s got important…I mean, you’ve got to stay with Mommy now, and Warty…uh, I mean, Mr. Mamū. Claudia, that incubator’s designed to be idiot proof. Just don’t screw with the thermometer, and everything will be fine.”

Bowser, the real Bowser, screamed, and dove to grab Bowser Koopa around the ankle. “No! Everything’s *not* gonna be fine! Don’t do it!”

Wendy started sobbing. “You…you said you’d be our Daddy forever!”

Bowser Koopa swallowed, and stomped toward the door. “Sorry, kid…but I’m not your real father. Now, I’m off to claim the Star Rod! Mwah, ha, ha, har!”

As the younger Bowser Koopa shook himself loose and hustled to the door, only the spirit Bowser himself managed to hold on tight enough to be dragged along. “No! Your kids need you! You *know* this is wrong! You need to be a man!”

As the younger Bowser Koopa dove out the door to escape the hoard of crying children, the real Bowser felt his face slammed against the door frame. Bowser howled and clutched his bleeding nose, and felt a fat lip.

As Bowser looked up, the room had vanished, along with all his children. A CRT-television flickered to life, silently blinking the message: “Alert! Alert!”

A door opened, and Bowser turned to find the younger Bowser Koopa holding aloft the Star Rod, with a big goofy grin on his face, with Kammy Koopa at his side. “Ah! What a perfect day! Can’t believe Peach was sneaking around after curfew, disguised as one of my own soldiers!”

Kammy shook her head. “We should discuss disciplinary measures for Princess Toadstool. If she could escape her room this whole time, who knows what kind of information she could pass on to Mario?”

Bowser Koopa shrugged. “Eh, well now that’s over, I can finally concentrate on finalizing the defensive measures for–”

Bowser Koopa spotted the blaring red alarm. “That’s odd, it’s not the Mario Bros. Emergency Alert System…Incubator security breach?”

This time, Bowser seemed to see the monitor through his own eyes. He was no longer watching the memory as a third-party spectator. He was himself again. Bowser scrambled to punch in Claudia Koopa’s number on the high-tech video phone. “Claudia? What’s going on?”

Claudia fumbled with her Koopa phone. “Oh, by Kuzenbo’s bald head, what is it this time?”

“Did you fiddle with the thermostat again?”

“Of course I did! The climate is warmer on Delfino Isle, so the thing blinked at me and I pressed the button.”

“Delfino Isle? What are you doing there? You’re supposed to be watching the incubator!”

“Do you think I’m completely irresponsible? I brought it with me, of course! Warty finally figured out we could strap it to the Koopa Clown Car with duct tape. He’s so handy!”

“You went flying around with our egg? Where is it? Show me!”

Claudia rolled her eyes, then pointed the phone camera so it showed the empty incubator. “God! This is like our bloody honeymoon all over again. It’s right here!”

Bowser grabbed the television, desperately trying to reach through the screen to the other side. “The incubator’s empty? Where’s the egg!”

“Huh? …Oh, the egg! Let’s see, I think I last saw it when we took off. The turbulence was awful! Hmm…I suppose we must have lost it along with the other luggage.”

Bowser slammed the control panel. “You dropped our egg out of a plane? Kammy! Get the Koopa Troopa Patrol out in full force!”

Kammy flailed her arms. “But…where do I send them?”

Bowser shook his fist at the image of Claudia on the screen. “Where did this happen? When did this happen?”

Claudia scowled. “You’re so pushy! …I suppose it must have been a week ago, somewhere over the Mushroom Kingdom.”

“A week? Our egg has been stranded in the wilderness for a week? Claudia, that is our child!”

Claudia smirked. “Oh, Bowzee, I don’t have to put up with your tantrums anymore. Anyway…it was just an egg.”

“No! That’s our–” Claudia hung up. Bowser stared at the blank, black screen, then slammed his fist through the spot where Claudia’s face had been a moment before.

Bowser felt tears streaming down his face. “Rraaaaah! My child! My *only* child! My…my *BABY!!!”*

Bowser heard two voices speaking over one another, one like old Kammy Koopas, and another…one he didn’t know. *“...Your heir.”*

Rounding on Kammy Koopa, Bowser saw an image of a beautiful woman with golden hair, superimposed over the image of his old advisor. Bowser snatched the woman by the throat and slammed her into the wall. “You! I *know* you! What have you done to me?”

The woman in the mirror, Bowsette, clutched feebly at her throat. “I…can’t do anything to you! I serve you! I *am* you!”

“Liar! I know illusion magic when I see it! Release me from this prison!”

Bowsette gurgled. “Can’t…prison…is your own mind!”

Bowser tightened his grip. “Stop speaking in riddles!”

Bowsette twitched her hand, and on the unbroken screens, multiple videos began to play. Bowser saw Mario knocking him into a pit of lava with a fireball, saw Mario kicking Bowser out of the sky to send him crash-landing in his flying Clown Car, saw Mario knocking Chain-chomps off a chandelier to send Bowser plummeting to the floor below, saw Mario spinning him by the tail before throwing Bowser into a spiked bomb trap.

Bowsette rasped for breath. “I’m starting to think…you enjoy losing. But with my power–”

Bowser threw Bowsette into the control panel, smashing all but one of the televisions. “I don’t need your power! I can beat Mario with my own strength!”

Bowsette waved a trembling hand, and an image of Peach appeared on the final screen. They both lay prone, helpless, a mirror-image of one another. “...And what about Peach?”

Bowser was fixated on the final screen. Bowsette chuckled, but her laughter was strained, as if her ribs were broken. “Heh…so beautiful…but I can feel her heart fading…time moves…slowly, here…you still have time…”

“Time? Time to do what?”

“...Time to think….to make the right decision…just pick her up…carry her across the finish line…and Mario will be dead.”

The final screen flickered with static, and alarms blared on all sides. “Red Alert! This is not a drill! Mario has breached the perimeter! All units to your stations! Prepare for battle!”

An image of Mario appeared on the screen, surrounded by all seven of the Star Spirits, the ancient guardians of the Star Rod, and a gaggle of Mario’s pathetic little friends following close behind.

Bowser heard his past self roar. “Mario, again? Mario, Mario…It’s always *Mario!* I’ll *KILL* him!!!”

Bower remembered holding the Star Rod above his head, remembered having the power of the heavens course though him, remembered how he had charged out to face Mario himself, wielding the strength of a god…and he remembered losing.

Then Bowser saw the past version of himself charging out of the room, and looked down to find his hands were frail, with five fingers again.

The image of Peach reappeared on the screen, reflecting on Bowser’s eyes as he reached toward her. “...kill…Mario?”

The entire television screen seemed to fill Bowser’s vision as he reached his pale hands through the screen, to grasp Peach.

Bowsette's Princess Lessons
Chapter XIX: The Good Samaritan

Little Mario and little Luigi were sitting on the coziest spot of the couch. Mario clutched a video game controlled in his first as he booted up *Popeye* on the Mario family's Nintendo Entertainment System. "This time, I'm gonna' kick Bluto's butt for sure, and save Olive Oyl!"

Luigi tugged at the controller in Mario's hand. "Hey! You're always Player 1! Let me have a turn!"

Mario pulled the controller away. "It's a two-player game, Luigi. You'll get a turn!"

"Yeah, but I want to be player 1."

"No you don't. You want me to go first so you know what's in store for you."

Mama Mia Rigassi Mario clapped her hands. "Knock it off! It's reading time. You can play video games after the story, *if* you quit squabbling."

Mario groaned. "Ah, Mama mia! More boring old books?"

Luigi held up a finger. "But reading opens up whole new worlds, Mario!"

Mama Mia poked Giuseppe Mario's shoulder as he sat snoozing in his easy chair. "Papa? It's reading time!"

Papa Mario started awake, and fumbled to find his place. "Let's see…Ah, yes, *The Parable of the Good Samaritan*! …A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead."

Little Luigi raised his hand. "Why'd they do that to the man?"

"Because they were bad guys."

Little Mario grinned, and punched his bean bag chair. "How bad did they work him over? Was the guy all bruised and bloody, with his teeth knocked out?"

Papa Mario shook his head. "Yes, no, probably, I dunno, shut up! Sure, let's say the poor chump's lying bleeding on the side of the road…where was I? …A priest happened to be going down the same road–"

Luigi's hand shot up. "A priest? Like Father Martinet?"

“No! Not like Father Martinet! Different kind of priest! Anyway, guy’s bleeding on the road, priest’s going down the same road, and, uh…and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too–”

Little Mario grabbed his head. “Wait, he just walked by the guy? He’s bleeding to death! Father Martinet would *never* do that!”

Papa Mario rubbed his eyes. “Yeah, exactly, because Father Martinet is a steady guy. But the priest in this story was a real sonnova’–”

Mama Mario cleared her throat. “Ahem!”

Papa Mario snapped his fingers. “Um, a son of a *good woman*, who raised him to be better than that! Anyhoo, guy’s dying, blood everywhere, Priest’s leaving him behind and…So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.”

Luigi bounced on his bean bag chair, his hand high in the air. “What’s a Levite?”

Little Mario punched his bean bag chair. “Wait! So Levi left the guy too? He’s right there!”

“No, no! A *Levite!* He was a…another kind of priest. The Levites were like a whole tribe of holy men.”

Little Mario stood up, shaking his fists at the heavens. “Then why doesn’t he help him?”

Mama Mario flicked Little Mario on the side of his head, not enough to hurt him, but enough to get his attention. “Because sometimes people forget to do what they know is right. Now, sit and listen to the story!”

Little Mario sat back down with a flump, with his arms and legs crossed in front of him. Little Mario’s face was a mix of polite interest and furious impatience.

Papa Mario sighed. “Hmmm, guy’s down for the count, Priest’s ignoring the problem, Levite’s doing likewise…But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.”

Luigi raised his hand, but before he could ask, Mama Mario said, “It’s like using antiseptic and a band-aid for a big boo-boo.”

Papa Mario nodded, and kept his focus on the book. “...Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have…Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

Mario's fist was resting on his chin, in a perfect imitation of Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker*. "The Samaritan guy?"

Papa Maro closed his book, looking pleased. "Exactly! The moral of the story is to be a Good Samaritan!"

Luigi waved his still-raised hand. "But what's a Samaritan?"

Papa Mario's eyes popped open. "What's a–? Hold on, your Mama wrote a note in the margins here…'An inhabitant of Samaria, or one that belonged to the sect which derived their appellation from that city. The Samaritans of the first century claimed to be the descendents of those ancient Israelites who were not deported from Jerusalem by the Assyrian conqueror Sargon II in 722 B.C."

By this point, Luigi had decided it was more efficient to just keep his hand raised the entire time. "So to be a Good Samaritan…we have to not get deported from Jerusalem by the Assyrian conqueror Sargon II in 722 B.C.?"

Papa slapped his book shut. "Mama Mia, help me out here!"

Mama Mario nodded. "You don't have to come from Samaria to be a Good Samaritan. The point of the story is that, in ancient times, the Samaritans and the Jews were hated enemies…Yes, Luigi?"

Mama Mario paused as she saw little Luigi's hand shoot up. "Like the Yankees and the Red Sox?"

"Even *worse* than the Yankees and the Red Sox. The Samaritans and the Jews both believed themselves to be the only true children of God. They hated each other so much, they didn't even want to touch each other. Even the word 'Samaritan' was like a slur."

Mario finally raised his own hand. "...Like when the other kids call us 'goombahs'?"

Mama Mario nodded, looking grave. "Yes, dear. Exactly like that. The people listening to that story would have been shocked. They didn't think it was possible for there to ever be a good Samaritan. But no matter who you are, or where you come from…You can choose to be the one who helps, rather than look the other way."

Little Mario nodded. "I can be the Good Samaritan."

…

Mario crashed face-first into a second brick obstacle, which could only be the wall. As he reached out blindly with his hands, Mario felt the boiling water like a flood as it penetrated the

radiant energy of the Fire Flower, soaking into his clothing, stabbing into his skin from all sides, like a million needles. Then his hand clasped the metal surface of the warp pipe exit.

In the chamber above, a burst of hissing steam erupted from the final gray warp pipe, and Mario emerged from it, collapsing. Every inch of his exposed skin was burned to a bright pink, and with every trembling movement, he felt his whole body screaming.

He heard a weak voice, and spotted Mrs. Sushie rasping for air. “Mario, dearie?”

Mario stood, ignoring the pain, and lifted her into his arms. Mrs. Sushie shook her head. “No! Don’t mind me…The others…”

But nevertheless, Mario carried Mrs. Sushie along the dark corridor, until he found Lady Bow and scooped her up into his other arm.

Lady Bow’s eyes fluttered open. “...Señor Mario? …The flame…beware the pink flame…it is not…” Lady Bow fainted.

Mario leapt up onto the grey stone platform, and spotted baby Watt, her radiant light burning like the sun, then flickering like a dying lightbulb. Mario took a step toward baby Watt, before he heard a familiar, monstrous roar. Mrs. Sushie leapt from Mario’s arms, landing roughly near little Watt. “Go! I’ll tend to her!”

With a curt nod, Mario set down Lady Bow, and dashed down the stone corridor toward the iron bridge, into the eerie red light.

Watt rolled onto her side to look up at Mrs. Sushie. There was a hairline crack in her spherical body, which glowed like molten glass. The air above her billowed from the radiant heat. “Auntie Su? …I don’t feel so good…”

Mrs. Sushie pulled out her emergency mom-supply bag, and found a glass thermometer. “Poor baby, you’re burning up!”

Watt and Mrs. Sushie both flinched as they heard a roar. It was not merely the scream of any man or woman, nor was it like the roar of a wildfire. But it was like all three.

Ignoring her own shivering, Mrs. Sushie poured cold water onto a towel, and applied it gently to Watt’s forehead. “There, there, dear. I’m here.”

…

In the underwater chamber, the billowing steam had slowed, but the water still bubbled at a steady boil. Princess Daisy, Luigi, Toadette, Goombario, Goombella, Kooper, Koops, Koopie-Koo, Bombette, Admiral Bobbery, Parakarry, Lakilester the Lakitu (formerly known as

“Spike”), Madame Flurrie, the Great Gonzales Jr., Ms. Mowz, and Vivian all huddled against the narrow ledge.

A shudder traveled through the boiling water, and they saw a stone collapse from the ceiling, plopping into the pool with a hiss. Daisy swallowed and turned to Vivian. “When you told Mario that an escape through the shadows would be risky…how risky are we talking? Near certainty of death?”

Two more pebbles crumbled from the hole left in the ceiling. Vivian seemed to be looking far away, staring at nothing. “...No, a fate far worse than death.”

As cracks formed through the ceiling above, Daisy only nodded. “Which means there’s a chance. In that case, I need you to take us to Goombaria’s shadow…please.”

Vivian arose. “Very well. But once I get you all back to safety, I’m going back to Mario.”

Goombella scoffed. “Don’t be silly! We’re going with you, of course.”

Vivian brushed her pink hair, revealing her look of surprise. “You…you really mean it?”

Goombella beamed. “Well, duh!”

Kooper slammed his fist into his open palm. “Mario’s always had our backs. Now it’s our turn to help him.”

Parakarry fixed his aviator cap. “Mario believed in me, even when I wasn’t sure I believed in myself.”

Koops fidgeted with his hoodie. “He taught me how to fight, when I thought I was too weak to fight.”

Koopie-Koo kissed Koops’ cheek. “He taught us that we can fight for those we love.”

Bombette rolled to her feet. “He saved my people from King Bom-omb…even though we Bob-omb’s weren’t exactly his best buddies in the past.”

Admiral Bobbery held Bombette. “He showed me that it’s never too late to try again.”

Madame Flurrie chuckled. “And that we’re never too old for a comeback!”

Lakilester the Lakitu pulled out his emergency-emergency-emergency sunglasses and flicked them on, with maximum coolness. “When I was stuck on being a jerk, he helped me remember who I was supposed to be.”

Gonzales Jr. pumped his fists. “He’s the undisputed champ! The Great Gonzales stood up for me, when I couldn’t stand up for myself!”

Koops rubbed his head. “Um…I seem to recall Mario saying we should let that hot dog merchant cook you up as an omelette…”

Gonzales Jr. guffawed. “Which was absolutely hilarious!”

Vivian turned to look at Toadette, who was busily wrapping Ms. Mowz’s injured ankle in a bandage. “What about you two? If you can’t fight, I’d better drop you off with Luigi.”

Toadette shook her head as she stood, holding up her first-aid kit. “I’m no fighter, but if anyone gets hurt, I’ll do whatever I can!”

The master mouse thief twitched her nose, then experimentally stood on her bandaged foot. “Squeak! Don’t you dare leave me behind! If I allow a hunk like Mario to leap into the jaws of death, and can’t find a way to sneak him back out, I’ll hang up my mask, and retire from my life as a thief!”

Goombella scowled. “...I think Mario would prefer that, actually.”

Ms. Mowz curled her tail into a heart. “Of course he would!”

Daisy grinned. “Then that settles it! Just give me a chance to drop off Luigi, and we’re all going straight to Mario! Guy’s a tank, but even he needs back up.”

Goombario glanced at Luigi’s prone form. “Uh, does backtracking give the Shadow Queen more time to catch us? Maybe it’s less risky just to go straight to Mario.”

Vivian shook her head. “There is no time in the shadows. We take the risk simply by choosing to enter them in the first place.”

Daisy nodded. “So a drop off for Luigi is no problem?”

“So long as the Shadow Queen isn’t waiting for us there, and so long as one of us has a strong connection to Goombaria…Goombario, how much would you say you love your little sister?”

Goombario blushed as he realized he was being put on the spot. “...More than life itself.”

With a shudder, the cracks spread down the walls, and through the floor. Vivian held out her hands. “Then let’s go.”

…

Bowser gently cradled Peach's head in his/her hands, and found blood on his/her palms. Peach's blood.

Then Bowser saw Peach's lips move as she murmured. "...Mario…"

Peach faded away. Somehow, Bowser sensed that her heart had stopped beating. He didn't know how he knew this. He only knew that it was true.

Then Bowser sensed something approaching from behind, and spun around. "Mario?"

Mario stumbled into the room, every single inch of his body screaming in pain with every single step. As he looked up, he saw Bowser hovering over Peach's prone body. It was as if Peach was resting in a perfect, dreamless sleep.

But something was wrong. Bowser's face was pale, his hair shining as gold as the sun. There was a tiny patch of skin around Bowser's left eye that was different from the rest: a dark golden brown, and Bowser's left eye shone red, in sharp contrast to the icy blue of his right eye. "Mario! You did this!"

Bowser strode forward, pink flames engulfing most of his body. A single tear appeared in his left eye, and spilled down his cheek. "You've killed my dream!"

With a wail of anguish, Bowser erupted in red and pink flame, which smashed through the ceiling and rocketed into the sky above. Mario shielded his eyes, and as the blinding light dimmed, he saw that Bowser was engulfed in red flame on his left side, pink flames on the right.

Bowser's red and gold hair billowed on either side of his/her face, and the tears evaporated from his red eye. "I'll kill you!"

…

In the silence of the shadows, Vivian held aloft a flame with one hand, while Daisy held onto her free hand. Luigi still lay collapsed over her shoulder, while the rest clung to Daisy's legs.

Goombario sat on Vivian's shoulder, concentrating on Goombaria. He mostly remembered years of daily teasing and tattling on one another. But memory stood out: the day Goombaria had come charging into the house, claiming that a man fell out of the sky and crashed and landed in the family's flower garden. And not just any man, but the legendary champion of the Mushroom Kingdom: Sir Mario of Brooklyn. Goombario remembered helping Goompapa and Goomama nurse Mario back to help, running to do whatever chores or errands they asked of him. He remembered Grandpa Goompa asking Mario to take young Goombario along with him, to give Goombario a chance to become a man. He remembered kissing Goombaria goodbye.

Goombaria's shadow appeared before them, and Vivian pointed them toward it. Goombario wanted to cheer, but heard no sound escape his throat. Then, long, shadowy hands erupted

from the outline of Goombaria's shadow, and flew toward them. Vivian held up her flame, and her thoughts echoed through the infinite shadow. "The hands of the Shadow Queen! It's a trap!"

Goombario remembered his promise to come back home, safe and sound, and the first wave of shadow hands erupted in white flames, only to be replaced by a second wave, and a third, coming from all sides.

Vivian spun, her flame twisting and exploding like a firework, a thousand sparks each ripping through a thousand of the Shadow Queen's hands. *"No good! Only one hope!"*

Vivian turned, and Daisy nodded. Mario's shadow appeared in the distance, and they all flew toward it.

[End of Chapter XIX]

Bowsette's Princess Lessons
Chapter XX: Sudden Death

"The objection to fairy stories is that they tell children there are dragons. But children have always known there are dragons. Fairy stories tell children that dragons can be killed."
–Attributed to G.K. Chesterton, by Terry Pratchett

There comes a point, in any battle, where there is no longer any time for words. Talking is slow. Thinking is slow. As you reach this point, you begin to feel time slowing down, all around you, and everything begins to happen all at once.

As Bowser's pillar of flame cast long shadows across the chamber, Mario turned and saw Vivian step out of his own shadow, about 30 feet behind him, back in the chamber where he had left behind the injured Lady Bow, Watt, and Mrs. Sushie. He saw the rest of his friends emerge from the shadow: they had all come.

There was a bone-chilling scream. As Bowser arched back his/her head, his/her wail of despair became the guttural howl of an animal.

A thin pink flame appeared from his/her throat, before it was surrounded by a wild red flame. Instinctively, Mario knew that neither the power of the Red Mushroom, nor the power of a Fire Flower, would save him. One hit from that breath meant instant death.

It is said that, when confronted with danger, people have a fight or flight response. But there is a third option: you can also freeze. When Mario's friends saw Bowser charging the next blast of flame, they all froze.

There was a very good reason why, in any adventure he undertook, Mario was always the presumptive leader. People said Mario was fearless, but that's not quite true. Mario was often afraid. He felt the fear of death, even now. Just like Luigi, Mario always had to resist his own fear, every time he entered into battle.

There was only one small difference between Mario and the rest of his friends. All of Mario's companions were brave adventurers. They were all willing to lay down their lives, fighting for what was right. But over many years, Mario had gotten so used to being afraid, that the fear itself seemed distant. It was as if Mario's fear was another person, a ghost standing on the sidelines and watching, as Mario dove forward.

And so, in that critical moment, when all of Mario's friends froze, Mario leapt forward to tackle Bowser to the ground, ignoring the heat that he knew spelled certain death

Pinning Bowser down by the throat, Mario pressed Bowser's face away to force Bowser to aim his/her deadly breath of fire up at the ceiling, away from his friends. A pink line cut through the

stone like a laser beam, followed by a pillar of red flame that ripped a molten hole through the upper corner of the stone chamber.

Bowser's eyes rounded on Mario, but before Bowser could resist Mario's grip, Mario landed a solid punch to the underside of Bowser's jaw, cutting off the stream of fire. Mario felt his knuckles burning through his gloves, and knew that only the protection of the Fire Flower had kept him alive so far.

With a scream of pain, Bowser pressed his/her hands and feet against the steel beams of the bridge, and with a blast of flame, Bowser and Mario were both lifted into the air, spiralling wildly. As they both slammed against the brick wall, hanging over the lava below, Bowser pinned Mario against the wall.

Bowser dug his/her claws into Mario's shoulders, but before Bowser could summon another blast of fire, Mario kicked against the wall, shoving past him/her.

As Mario dove toward the safety of the bridge, Bowser howled and spun in midair, the flames from his/her hands keeping him/her aloft. Then Bowser spotted Mario, and a pink flame leapt to life in his/her throat. Sensing danger, Mario took a long forward jump off the bridge to escape the bullet of pink flame, which ripped a small hole through the metal bridge where Mario had been standing a moment before.

Dimly, Mario heard all his friends screaming his name as he leapt forward into nothingness. Then he kicked against the wall, desperately trying to reach the safety of the bridge again. As Mario felt gravity begin to pull him down toward the lava and certain death, Mario thought of the flames in Bowser's palms, and charged two orange fireballs in his own gloved hands. With a burst, Mario blasted the flames downward giving him a final boost in mid air. Slowly, Mario spun his arms to reach the edge of the metal bridge.

Then Bowser flew under the bridge and rocketed up to catch Mario across the chest. As Bowser slammed Mario against the brick wall, Mario gasped and felt the power of the fire flower being ripped from his body.

The flames from Bowser's feet propelled them both upwards, until they smashed against the ceiling. Mario went limp, and as he tried to get his bearings, Bowser spun in mid-air like a judo expert to throw Mario down toward the bridge. Mario felt the wind knocked out of his chest as he slammed down against it.

Then Bowser pressed against the ceiling and rocketed downward to slam his/her heel down against Mario's throat with such force, it sent a ripple traveling through the metal bridge.

Goombella screamed.

Mario choked, and as the power of the Red Mushroom was knocked out of him, Mario began to shrink to his original, diminutive size.

All of Mario's friends and companions froze. Mario, their Mario, the greatest fighter they had ever known, had just been crushed…in a matter of mere seconds. Bowser threw back his/her head and guffawed. "Gahar! I did it! I finally did it! I bet Mario, fair and square! And now…"

A small, pink flame appeared in Bowser's throat. "It's Game Over!"

But before Bowser could deliver the killing blow, a small Goomba smashed against his/her cheek, knocking aside the deadly bullet of pink fire. Bowser snarled and clutched his/her jaw. "Argh?!?"

Goombario's blue cap flopped as he landed, and spun to face Bowser, then leapt upward for another headbutt attack. "Multibonk!"

Goombario's second headbutt attack was aimed at Bowser's chin, but Bowser caught the Goomba like a football. "Argh! Enough of this! You Goombas want to be Mario's cannon fodder? Fine!"

Goombario struggled to kick free, to no avail. Grasping Goombario by the foot, Bowser slammed the young Goomba into the ground twice, first with a ringing slam, then an ugly, thick thud. "Seriously! You're just a goomba! How the hell do you expect to beat me?"

Bowser held the Goomba over the edge of the bridge, aiming a pink fireball at Mario's unconscious body with his/her free hand. But before Bowser could finish them both off, Goombario gasped. "...get..her…"

As he craned his neck to look at the defeated Goomba, Bowser sneered. "Come again?"

With a trembling breath, Goombario looked past Bowser to roar to the others. "Together!"

It was as if a spell had been broken. As she saw Goombario stupidly charging in danger, Goombella suddenly became aware that she could do that too. "Together!" cried Goombella.

With a howl, Bowser shot a pink fireball wildly towards Mario, but before it could impact, Vivian appeared from Mario's shadow. With a wave of her index finger, Vivian redirected the pink fireball back toward Bowser's face, grazing the crown above his head.

As she sprinted to help Goombario, Goombella felt a rush of wind as a blue Koopa shell whizzed over her head like a bullet. Kooper emerged from his shell in mid air to kick Bowser full in the chest. As Bowser released his/her grip on Goombario, the exhausted young Goomba tumbled toward the lava below, before Goombella caught him in mid air and tugged him back to the safety of the bridge.

With a guttural howl, Bowser threw Kooper with such force, the blue-shelled koopa impacted against the brick wall above the lava, leaving a small crater. Before Kooper could fall to his death, Parakarry caught him in mid air. Parakarry struggled to pull up, before Madame Flurrie appeared below them, blowing a mighty breath to create an updraft.

With a snarl, Bowser aimed the pink bullet of flame at Mario's heart, but the moment Bowser fired, Mario's shadow shivered. At the speed of light, Vivian emerged from Mario's shadow and redirected the pink bullet away from Mario. As Vivian held up her hands, two flames danced across her palms. "What's the matter, Bowser? Been burning the candle at both ends? Your flames weren't this weak the last time we beat you."

Throwing his/her hands up high, Bowser began to charge a double fire-ball, the pink and red flames mixing across one another. "Stand aside, you weaklings! I've already beaten Mario. I'm the greatest magician of the millenium!"

The Great Gonzales Junior sprinted forward, jumping up and over Vivian's head to deliver a flying double kick to Bowser's face. "Nah. You're just the chump we stepped over before we took down the Shadow Queen."

As Bowser blasted at Vivian and Gonzales Jr. with the combined force of red and pink fire from both his hands and his throat, Vivian screamed and twisted her hands to magically deflect the fire, acting as Mario's only shield. Gonzales was forced to jump off the bridge into nothingness, kicking his feet wildly to defy gravity and circle behind Bowser. Before Gonzales Jr. could land, Bowser snatched the Baby Yoshi out of the air. As Gonzales Jr was engulfed in pink flames, he cried, his voice cracking..

At the sound of his friends' screams of pain, Koops grabbed Koopie-Koo and Toadette by their shoulders. "Koopie-Koo! Get Toadette to Princess Peach! I'll cover you!"

Before Koopie-Koo could do anything, Koops withdrew into his shell and shot towards Bowser, slamming against his/her chest, and knocking an unconscious Gonzales Junior free from Bowser's grip. As Bowser's flame dissipated, Vivian emerged from the billowing smoke, gasping for air, her hat singed. Gagging, Bowser spun and slammed Koops against the stone steps, just below Princess Peach. As Bowser spun around, charging another blast of red and pink flame in his throat, he saw a pink spherical object fill his vision. Bombette crashed against Bowser's perfect nose, sending his next blast of flame ripping through the stone wall to the side.

As Goombario and Goombella carried an unconscious Koops up the steps, they were forced to duck to evade the deadly blast.

Seizing their opportunity, Koopie-Koo shot past Bowser to reach Princess Peach, Toadette riding on Koopie-Koo's back like a surfer. They were followed by Princess Daisy, who carried Luigi across her shoulders.

“Emergency oven mitts!” shouted Mrs. Sushie as she hopped along, carrying a white hot baby Watt to safety.

As Bowser threw Bombette like a shot put into the brick wall above the stone steps, he spotted Koopie-Koo and Toadette zipping past him and stumbled forward. “Huh? No fair! I already–”

“Daisy Kick!” roared Daisy, as she landed a running jump side kick against the back of Bowser’s skull from behind. Then she carried Luigi up the stone steps to lay him down next to the unconscious bodies of Koops and Peach.

Toadette slammed her first-aid kit against the ground next to Peach. “Her heart has stopped! Daisy, administer CPR. I’ll have to cook up a Life Shroom.”

Toadette pulled out her signed copy of *The Art of Baking Delicious Home-Baked Goodies For War* by Tayce T. Toad, and flipped open to the emergency recipe page.

Clutching his throbbing skull, Bowser wailed. “Hey! I’m the hero of this story! I’m supposed to save Princess–” A red spiny ball slapped against Bowser’s buttocks from behind. Bowser howled and clutched his/her buttocks. He turned to find Lakilester the Lakitu bearing down on him, holding aloft another red Spiny Egg in one hand, and a furious looking Admiral Bobbery in his other. As Lakilester wound up his arm to throw Admiral Bobbery, Bowser yanked the red spiny from his/her backside and chucked it straight at Lakilester’s face.

Lakilester just managed to pitch Admiral Bobbery before the spiny projectile smashed against his own nose, breaking his emergency-emergency-emergency sunglasses clean in two. Admiral Bobbery’s fuse lit, and with an explosion he slammed into Bowser’s stomach, knocking him to the floor. With a huff, Bowser tried to summon another blast of fire, and to his horror, felt the magic of the fire dying in his lungs. Then, a vision of a fire flower appeared before him, and it was as though the ghostly fire flower leapt down his throat.

With a groan, Bowser aimed a fiery breath downward at the old Bob-omb attacking him. Vivan appeared in Bowser’s shadow, desperately trying to redirect the deadly flames away from the bridge, but not in time to save Admiral Bobbery.

As Admiral Bobbery felt his fuse lit, he knew another explosion was imminent and fixed his eyes on Bowser. With a second explosion, Admiral Bobbery burst forward, purposefully slamming into Bowser’s face before he flew wildly into the air, crashing against the stone wall above the steps and collapsing down next to the other injured heroes.

By now, Toadette had somehow donned a Florence Nightingale nurse costume as she administered first aid to multiple patients.

As Bowser spun on Mario's unconscious body, two pink fireballs appeared in his/her hands, and a third pink flame charged in his/her mouth.

With a cry, Vivian disappeared from Bowser's shadow and reappeared in Mario's shadow, holding up her hands. With a wave of Vivian's finger, the first pink fireball dissipated into a thousand tiny sparks like fireflies, while the second slammed against Vivan's chest. Trembling, Vivian waved her hand to redirect the bullet, which ripped through one of the chain links supporting the metal bridge on her side.

Then Kooper and Parakarry flew into Bowser's stomach with such force, they lifted him/her up into the air. As Parakarry flew around the room in a wide circle, Kooper released his grip on Parakarry and used a diving kick to send Bowser back down to the metal bridge below, farther away from Mario and his injured friends.

Bowser slapped Kooper away, but before Kooper could fall into the lava, Gonzales Junior appeared at the bridge and stuck out his long, sticky tongue to catch Koooper. Then Gonzales Junior spat Kooper out like a projectile, aimed at Bowser's center of gravity. As Bowser attempted to catch the Koopa, the force caught him off guard and he took the blow full in the stomach. As the magic of the fire flower dissipated, Bowser's torn dress flashed from glowing red to black.

"Keep the pressure on him!" yelled Goombario as he rushed to join the fray.

Goombella was hot on his heels. "He totally just lost the fire flower! Take him down!"

Then a lot of things happened, all at once. Kooper snatched Bowser's arm and pinned it against his chest. Goombario and Goombella leapt into the air to delivered two of their patented multibonk attacks to Bowser's face. Parakarry dove from above to land a sky diving axe kick. Gonzales Jr. leapt off the bridge, and wall kicked to flank Bowser's left side, aiming an elbow strike for Bowser's face. Lakilester hovered above, pulling out another red spiny to aim at Bowser. Madame Flurrie fluttered into the air from under the bridge, preparing to do a belly flop to flatten Bowser. Bombette rolled to her feet and lit her fuse, looking for a clear shot in the chaos. Mrs. Sushie puffed up like a puffer fish, preparing to spit a jet stream of water like a bullet at Bowser.

And then, Bowser began to move. First, the fire that was dying in his throat sparked back to life, and his dress transformed from black to red, as the magic of the fire flower was somehow restored. A pink bullet erupted from Bowser's mouth, ripping Lakilester's projectile out of his hand. Bowser swung his pinned arm, using Kooper's body like a club to smash Parakarry out of the sky and toward the lava. Seeing that Parakarry was knocked out, Kooper released his grip on Bowser, and dove to catch Parakarry, snatching one of the chains of the bridge for support.

Gonzales Jr. managed to land his elbow strike against Bowser's throat, but as Bowser felt the blow, he snatched the baby Yoshi and threw him aside. Lakilester spotted the danger and flew

to catch Gonzales Junior. Goombario and Goombella spun on their heels and landed another two headbutts, both Goombas acting in perfect synch. Just as Bowser felt the two blows bounce off the back of his head, Bombette blasted into the air and slammed against the front of his face.

Fighting past the pain, Bowser reached with his other hand behind his shell, and produced one of the magic hammers he had tucked away earlier, and threw it wildly at Madame Flurrie. Madame Flurrie gasped as the hammer sunk deep into her belly, knocking the wind out of her, and sucked for air. Instantly, the hammer disappeared, and reappeared back in Bowser's fist, just as Goombario attempted another head bonk.

Bowser knocked Goombario downwards with the hammer, then tried to sidestep and aim his second hammer at the Lakitu and Baby Yoshi.

Sensing what he was up to, Goombella leapt forward to intercept his arm, but too late. Bowser's second hammer went flying towards Lakilester as he attempted to pull up from a dive to rescue Gonzales Junior. The force of the impact sent Lakilester into a death spiral.

That would have been the end of Lakilester and Gonzales Junior had Madame Flurrie not spotted them, and flown down to intercept them.

With a mighty gust of breath, Madame Flurrie sent Lakilester and Gonzales junior fluttering into the air like leaves, before the lava below exploded with a bubble of fire and slammed into her back. With a scream, Madame Flurrie rose into the air, and collapsed on the bridge next to Mario, her whole body steaming. Lakilester slammed the back of his head against the wall, and crumpled to the floor with Gonzales Junior still in his arms.

Bowser spun wildly, throwing both his magical hammers as they reappeared in his hands. One slammed Goombella with such force, she went flying toward the stone steps. Goombario leapt to catch her, absorbing the brunt of the impact as they both smacked against the stone steps, but both Goombas lay still.

Mrs. Sushie blasted Bowser in the chest with a shot of water, then flew at Bowser herself, chanting, "Cheep cheep!"

The blast of water sent Bowser stumbling back, but he recovered and knocked Mrs. Sushie out of the sky with a thrown hammer. She came crashing to a halt next to Mario and Madame Flurrie.

Goombella gasped as she tried to struggle to her feet, then realized that when Goombario had leapt to catch her, he had taken the brunt of the blow and been knocked unconscious. Goombella cradled Goombario as she examined the chaos of the battle unfolding.

By that time, Admiral Bobbery and Koops had gotten a second wind. Koops shot wildly at Bowser, aiming his shell to try and knock aside one of the hammers. It almost worked. Bowser

slammed the hammer down on Koops skull with such force, the hammer flew from Bowser's grip. That gave Admiral Bobbery just enough of an opening to crash into Bowser's stomach. Bobbery and Bowser both went flying over the prone bodies of Mario and Madame Flurrie, crashing down on the bridge opposite from the escape.

With a snarl, Bowser grasped at Admiral Bobbery's hat, the pink flames in his/her palm igniting the fuse again. As Admiral Bobbery exploded, Bowser was thrust backward, and the power of the fire flower dissipated.

As Bowser arose, reeling, something strange happened. A pink bullet of fire sparked in his throat, then flickered, like a lighter struggling to ignite against a strong wind.

Goombella gasped as she stumbled to her feet, limping. "Attack now!" Then Goombella felt her leg give out, and knew something was broken.

There was a blur as small, baby Yoshi darted across the bridge like a rabbit, lightly leaping over the prone bodies of his fallen companions. As Bowser held his/her jaw open wide, Gonzales Junior tossed a white and green egg straight at Bowser's mouth. Bowser gagged on the egg, smoke hissing from his/her lips, before Gonzales Junior leapt up to deliver a flying knee kick to the underside of Bowser's jaw. The egg exploded like a firework in Bowser's mouth, sending eggshell pieces zipping in every direction. Wheezing, Bowser blinked back tears to spot the Baby Yoshi, spinning in midair to deliver a hip drop attack.

Then, Bowser saw the ghostly image of a fire flower, floating before his eyes.

With a snarl, Bowser aimed a wild back hand at the image of the fire flower, and connected with Gonzalez Junior. The baby Yoshi was sent flying backwards, and came bouncing and rolling to a halt next to Mario and Madame Flurrie.

Bowser roared in a deep, guttural voice. "No! More! Sissy! Power ups! I don't need 'em!"

Then, with a twitch, Bowser's hair shimmered, bright gold, his/her voice cracking. It was as if he/she was having an argument with himself/herself. "We need them! Now, strike!"

The shadows in the room rippled as a pink bullet of fire sparked to life in Bowser's throat, followed by a giant burst of red fire. Bower aimed the flame directly at Mario's heart, and with a snarl, fired the deadly bullet at his hated, unconscious enemy.

Then Vivian appeared from Mario's shadow, deflecting the pink bullet with a wave of her gloved hand, before the slower red flames engulfed her.

As Vivian's hat and hair were scorched away, the shadow siren trembled and slumped forward, her body charred and smoking.

Goombella screamed, and fought to stand up, blocking out the stabbing pain of her broken leg. “Vivian!”

With a growl that sounded like half a roar of triumph and half a roar of fury, Bowser rocked back his/her head and a second pink flame appeared.

Then Goombella saw a glint of gold as something flew past her peripheral vision. Someone, wearing blue overalls and a green plumber’s hat, jumped through the air, wielding the giant, decorative, golden axe high above their head.

A new challenger was approaching!

But as Goombella glanced at her injured friends at her side, she realized that the strange warrior wearing Luigi’s hat and overalls could not be Luigi. After all, here was Luigi, lying unconscious next to Goombella…wearing nothing but his green polkadot briefs.

As Bower unleashed the pink flame, Princess Daisy swung the axe blade like a baseball bat, deflecting the bullet with a ping. Spinning the long-handled axe over her head, Daisy pivoted on her heel and thrust forward to slam the butt of the shaft into Bowser’s chest, knocking him/her back.

Bowser wheezed as he/she clutched his/her chest.

Daisy held her axe forward in an offensive stance. “You cannot pass.”

Crying, Bowser chucked both magic hammers toward Princess Daisy’s face, then charged another fiery breath. Daisy blocked the first hammer, but the second one connected with her shoulder. She barely managed to catch herself, then leapt forward to block the bolt of fire, deflecting it with a spiral of her weapon. “I am Princess Daisy of Sarasaland. Your dorky fire will not avail you, Kooky Koopa! YOU…SHALL NOT…PASS!!”

Daisy slammed the butt of the shaft down with such force, it sent a tremor through the metal bridge.

Bowser roared, and the pink and red flames engulfed his/her body, before gathering into two fireballs in his/her palms, each twice the size of a regular fire ball.

Daisy swallowed a lump in her throat.

Then she noticed a chain on the bridge rattling right behind her, and Parakarry clawed his way up onto the bridge, before pulling up Kooper after him. Both were looking the worse for wear. Daisy barked over her shoulder. “We don’t have to beat Bowser! Just get everyone safely to the other side of the bridge, and we’re outta–”

Bower unleashed the two fire balls one after the other, spinning to follow up with a flame powered, mid air kick. Daisy managed to block the first fire ball with ease, but was forced to make a clumsy swing to deflect the second. She barely managed to secure her grip on the axe and block before Bowser came flying down to deliver a downward axe kick that snapped the handle of the axe in two.

Kooper snatched up the unconscious body of Gonzales Junior, while Parakarry grabbed Mrs. Sushie. After carrying their friends to the other side of the bridge, the two Koopas spun to find Princess Daisy and Bowser fighting for control of the axe blade. With a howl, Bowser released his grip on the axe with one hand, and a magic hammer materialized in his grip. With a wild swing, Bowser knocked Princess Daisy back, forcing her to release her grip on the axe.

Bowser tossed the axe like a frisbee, and Daisy ducked backwards to dodge the deadly blade. The blade caught the tip of Luigi's cap as it flew above Daisy's face, before the axe flew across the room and sank deep into the stone wall next to the exit.

Just beneath the axe blade, Toadette whipped off her nurse costume to reveal a white, scientist's lab coat. "Princess Peach is stable! Cooking up a Fire Flower!"

Daisy kick-flipped to land back on her feet and aim a punch at Bowser's face. Bowser arm-blocked, then counter punched, which Daisy deflected with a "wax-on, wax-off" karate block. Daisy used the opportunity to shove Bowser back and away, looking around to spot her fallen companions. "Who's left?"

At the opposite end of the bridge, Koops stood, and held aloft Admiral Bobbery and Lady Bow. "I've got these two!"

Still steaming, Madame Flurrie lifted herself, clutching Mario and Vivian's unconscious bodies against her expansive bosom. "I've got these two!"

"Well, I've got these two *hammers!"* roared Bowser, before tossing them both. Koops spun to shield his two friends from the first hammer, before it impacted his sturdy shell with a dense, ugly, "Thunk!"

Daisy dove to catch the second hammer, bare-handed, then spun to toss it back at Bowser. "Go! I'll cover you!"

As Bowser raised his/her arms, the two hammers evaporated out of thin air and reappeared in his/her hands with a soft, "Poof!"

Koops halted as he saw Bowser aiming a hammer at both him and Daisy, then charged forward anyway, ducking his head into his turtle shell to avoid one of the hammers before it could slam into his face. Daisy pinned Bowser's second arm, before he/she lifted her bodily with one arm

and tossed her to the floor. Daisy landed roughly on her back, then rolled backwards to regain her footing.

When she looked up, Daisy saw pink flames crackling from Bowser's lips as he/she smiled, softly. "I'd prefer not to torch a Princess of House Toadstool. Stand aside, and I'll spare you."

Daisy took a shaky breath. She had no cover, but she was also the only thing standing between Bowser and the exit. "Bite me."

Bowser's smile widened to reveal his/her shark-like teeth, then his/her body trembled as a pink bullet of flame danced in his/her throat, the tip of the bullet aimed at Daisy's heart.

By then, Kooper and Parakarry had safely laid down their injured companions, and started to charge back into the fight to aid Daisy, but there was no hope of closing the distance in time.

Daisy made a final desperate lunge as she saw the pink flame build to a deadly heat, but before Bowser could shoot it, he slammed his left fist into the right side of his own face. His golden hair started to billow, then turned blood red, as his skin turned to a swarthy, golden brown hue. As the power of the fire flower started to die, his dress flickered black for an instant, before it shone blood red, like a sputtering forge.

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Inside the corridors of Bowser's mind palace, Bowsette was knocked backwards onto her shapely behind. Bower's inner world took the shape of his war room in the Great Demon King's Fortress, a war game table sitting before his iron throne.

Scrambling to her feet, Bowsette looked through Bowser's eyes at the decimated remains of Mario's adventure party. With a cat-like squeal, Bowsette kicked over the war table and slammed her fists against the empty throne. "Fine! You want to be a big, strong man? Then you can fight like a man…and fight alone!"

With a wave of her hand, Bowsette produced a box of popcorn out of thin air, with a poof of pink flame. "I can't wait to see how you manage to foul this one up." She popped a single piece of popcorn into her mouth, and chewed slowly, savoring it.

…

Daisy crashed into Bowser like a football linebacker. As Daisy grappled to pull Bowser into a head lock, Kooper and Parakarry appeared, pinning down Bowser's arms on either side. Bowser spat, as the last spark of the pink flame died in his throat. "No more sissy, pink, girl-scout fire!"

Bower slammed his left fist into Daisy's face with such force, Kooper went flying and narrowly caught a chain link support of the bridge. Daisy twisted to keep her hold on Bowser's neck, trembling.

Bowser grunted as he slammed his right fist into Daisy's belly.

As Parakarry clung to Bowser's right arm, he seized the opportunity to loosen his grip and spin in midair, using Daisy as an anchor to pivot and land an elbow strike to Bowser's skull.

Bowser recoiled as he felt the blow. As Bowser swung blindly, Kooper swung himself up onto the bridge to aim a roundhouse kick to Bowser's leg. As Bowser stumbled onto one knee, Daisy twisted to secure her grip on his throat. Bowser choked. "I can win..."

Then Bowser caught Kooper's leg, and physically swung Kooper like a club, slamming Parakarry out of the sky. The two Koopas went flying backwards on their shells, until they crashed into the lowest stone step at the end of the bridge.

Bowser spun wildly to escape Daisy's grasp, almost plunging off the bridge and into the lava. As she felt Bowser lunging forward off the bridge, Daisy instinctively released her grip and stumbled back. Bowser caught the chain link support with one hand, as a magic hammer appeared in his free hand. "...with my own strength!"

Bowser pulled, straining his whole abdominal core to pull himself back onto the bridge and add his full weight into his next strike, aiming for Daisy's center of gravity. Instinctively, Daisy blocked her chest as the magic hammer slammed into her, and sent her flying across the bridge, before the second hammer smashed her against the brick wall above the exit. Daisy fell limp to the floor below.

Bellowing, Bowser aimed his first hammer at Daisy's prone body as the second magically reappeared in his other hand, then threw. "I don't need no stinkin'–"

"Fire Flower!" screamed Toadette, as she held aloft the power up she'd cooked up in her portable kitchen. The moment Toadette held the fire flower aloft, someone snatched it out of her hand.

Daisy blinked, her head spinning, and saw a hammer flying toward her face, before Luigi dove forward to snatch the hammer out of the air. Green flames billowed from Luigi's fist as he gripped the hammer tight. As the power of the fire flower coursed through him, Luigi's green-and-white-polka-dot-covered briefs shone with holy light, and transformed into radiant white-and-green-polka-dot-covered briefs.

Daisy smiled sweetly at the sight, before she swooned into unconsciousness, with a goofy grin on her face.

Luigi's very mustache seemed to bristle with righteous anger. "Bowser! Stand down!"

Bowser leered, and as he held aloft his hand, Luigi felt the magic hammer pulling him forward with irresistible force, slamming his face against the bridge as he was dragged along. Bowser twisted his free hand, and the hammer disappeared from Luigi's grip with a poof before reappearing in Bowser's clutches. As Bowser tossed the second hammer at Luigi's face, Luigi was forced to duck and let it glance off his arms, barely avoiding a lethal strike. "Poor little Luigi. You can't even touch me, as long as I have these…hammers?"

As Bowser held up his hand, he found one of the hammers missing. Then Ms. Mowz crawled up his arm and clung to his open palm, just as the second hammer magically reappeared. Ms. Mowz snatched it out of the air and dove down, carrying both hammers in front of her like they were sticks of dynamite.

Howling like a blood hound, Bowser dove forward and snatched Ms. Mowz's heart-shaped tail. "Hey! Gimme those, you little thief!"

Ms. Mowz squeaked as she felt her tail snap taught, then tossed both hammers at Luigi. "Luigi, darling! Catch!"

Unfortunately, she threw too quickly before warning Luigi. The moment Luigi stood to catch the hammers, the first one slammed into his nose. As Luigi flinched and cradled his nose, he actually managed to catch the second hammer cleanly, before they both disappeared with a little poof, and reappeared back in Ms. Mowz's paws.

Ms. Mowz's eyes went wide behind her domino mask as she saw the terrible hammers back in her clutches. "Squeeek! I don't want 'em! I don't want 'em!"

As she threw them away desperately, only for them to pop into existence back in her hands, Ms. Mowz looked nervously over her shoulder. Bowser smirked, smoke billowing from his lips as he charged a blast of his good, old, reliable, red fire breath at Mr. Mowz's defenseless tail. Then Luigi tackled Bowser to the ground, and Ms. Mowz scampered away.

Then, Bowser felt his red flames spark to life in his palms, and as he kicked to get away from Luigi, Bowser felt a delightful feeling of weightlessness. As Bowser's eyes shot open, he began to pilot by instinct, pivoting in midair to send a startled Luigi crashing to the bridge below. Bowser shook as he discovered he could fly, the red flames producing a delightful, steady heat against the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet. As Bowser looked down, he saw only Luigi. "No one left to fight your battles for you, little man."

Then a little man tackled Bowser from behind. Mario had no Fire flower. Mario had no Red Mushroom. But little Mario was awake and back in the fight.

As Bowser struggled to regain balance, he spun wildly and crashed into the bridge. When Bowser lifted himself onto his hands and knees, he saw Luigi deftly catch Mario. Ms. Mowz scampered to their side, waving both hammers above her head. “Hot potato! Hot potato!”

As Mario and Lugi took the hammers, the weapons changed form. A magic hammer always takes the shape that most suits its wielder. Bowser favored the same clawed, black metal hammers used by Hammer Head Brothers. But in Mario and Luigi’s hands, the hammers became solid, double-faced sledge hammers.

For an instant, Bowser’s eyes went wide as he took in the sight of his two foes. Then he blasted forward like a rocket, charging a burst of red fire in his throat.

Luigi charged to the front line, his flame-proof briefs providing barely enough protection as he swung his hammer like a baseball bat to slam away the fireball. The fireball smashed through the remnants of the ceiling, which started to crack and shatter in a spider-web pattern on all sides.

At the exact same moment, Mario leapt into the air over Luigi, aiming a downward strike at Bowser’s head. Bowser spotted it and veered off course just in time. Bowser’s acceleration sent him flying past both Mario brothers before he veered up and into the sky, spiraling in mid air to spot his target.

Bowser expected to have a moment to get his bearings, but Mario and Luigi fought as though they shared a single mind, without hesitation. Mario lightly hopped onto the face of Luigi’s hammer, before Luigi spun it in a spiral to throw Mario into the air after Bowser. Bowser swung up his hands to roast Mario, but Mario pinned his hammer between his feet to use the metal head as an improvised shield, absorbing Bowser’s attack, before they collided in mid air.

The force of Bowser’s flames sent him shooting down toward the bridge. But as Bowser felt the power of the last Fire Flower begin to die, he somehow sensed that there would not be another.

Desperately, Bowser kicked up his feet, and with one final blast, he tore free from Mario and came rolling to a halt on the metal bridge, barely avoiding a head on collision. As Bowser caught himself and charged straight at Mario, snarling, he failed to take account of Luigi.

Using two green fireballs, one in each of his hands, Luigi shot forward like a rocket, clotheslining Bowser with the handle of his hammer. Bowser kicked and rolled wildly to escape from being pinned down, only for Mario to slam his hammer down with full force on top of Bowser’s crown. As Bowser saw stars filling his eyes, Mario somersaulted over Bowser’s shoulder and used his hammer to pin Bowser against the throat from behind.

The cracks in the walls shuddered through the room, and with a rumble, the entire ceiling was ripped up into the sky by a mighty gust of wind.

As Bowser tried to throw the little man off his head, Luigi tackled Bowser from the front to pull him into a bear hug. Ignoring Bowser's claws as they slashed across his face, Luigi called over his shoulder. "Toadette! Cut the bridge!"

Toadette glanced around, spotting the golden axe blade in the wall to her side. "But the lava! You'll die!"

Luigi grit his teeth as Bowser clawed at his shoulder, desperate to break free. "Don't worry! I have a plan!"

As Luigi held up his hand behind Bowser, a green fire ball began to glow bright, growing steadily larger and larger.

As Mario felt the heat of the green light, he twisted to shout at Toadette. "Do it now!"

Toadette snatched the broken handle of the axe, and with a single kick, pulled it free from the wall.

As Toadette held the golden axe high above her head, Bowser saw his reflection in the blade, and roared.

With a single stroke, Toadette cut through the chain holding up the suspension bridge, and it collapsed, tumbling to the lava below.

Luigi unleashed the force of his green fireball, and with a tremendous "Boom!" all three thrust forward in mid air, toward the exit. The force of Luigi's explosive fireball carried him the farthest, like a green missile. He sailed over Toadette's head, wailing, and would have crashed headfirst into the brick wall on the opposite side of the exit if Daisy hadn't dived into the air to catch him in her arms. "Lui–"

As Luigi's lips smashed into Daisy's lips, they both went sailing down the final chamber, over the steps, past the glowing letters that spelled the words "Goal!" and came crashing and rolling to a halt on the floor.

The entire room began to shine and pixelate around them. Bowser and Mario both fell short and began to tumble toward the lava below. Bowser swung his arms in front of him as if trying to swim in mid air, before gravity took its toll. Bowser hurtled to the lava below.

The Mario Maker's voice stuttered to life. "Finished! Daisy Wins the Race!"

Mario reached for the ledge, and caught a single chain that had snapped free from the rest of the bridge, slamming roughly against the wall. Toadette rushed to grab the chain, and strained to pull up Mario. Mario felt an explosion of hot, hissing air from the lava below pressing against his back, singing the hairs on the back of his neck.

Toadette grimaced, ignoring the sizzling metal of the chain as she maintained her grip. She couldn't offer a free hand without losing her hold.

As Mario reached for the ledge with one hand, he felt the chain slip from grip. Mario gasped, before something caught him. As he looked up, he saw his own reflection, shining in Peach's eyes. Peach yanked Mario up and onto the ledge, and they stumbled backwards, held tight in each other's arms. As Peach cradled Mario's face, her chest heaved as she struggled to catch her breath. "Your life…is not worth less than mine."

There was a blood curdling howl, and they all saw Bowser flying into the air, clutching his wide, curvy backside, which was currently on fire. "Yeeow! Hot, hot, hot!"

As Bowser fell back down toward the lava, his eyes wide as he realized what was inevitably about to happen. "No, no, no! This can't be how it ends! This can't be the–"

Bowser's rear end landed in the lava, and he shot up into the sky, kicking his legs and wailing. Fortunately for Bowser, though not so fortunate for his buttocks, the power of cartoon logic allowed the people of the Mushroom World to defy both death and gravity, so long as their pants were on fire to provide sufficient motivation.

Bowser came bouncing to a halt on the safety of the ledge, screeching to a halt on his rear end. The resulting friction did nothing to lessen the flames engulfing his behind. Bowser leapt to his feet and ran in circles, howling, leaving a black trail of smoke behind him. "Yah, ha, ha, ha, haaaaw!"

Mario, Peach, and Toadette all tackled Bowser, rolling down the stairs with him until they reached the final room below the goal post.

Peach winced as she looked up. "Who's missing?"

Goombella ticked a clip board as she examined a line of her unconscious comrades, all laid out on beds. "Everyone is here! We're all–"

The entire world went dark around them. Goombella gulped. "–safe?"

From the darkness, a ghostly image of a Blooper floated eerily before them. "Bloop?"

Themm in the distance, a small white square appeared, the size of a single pixel, and gradually began to expand as it grew closer and closer, like a massive perfectly square ball of light about to crash into all of them.

The Blooper waved its tentacle in a salute, and floated away. "Bloop. Bloop. Bloop."

Then the white square of light slammed into them like an oncoming train.

…

Goombaria pressed the emergency reset button furiously as she glanced back and forth from the control panel to the dead, black screen. “Please…let them all be okay…”

The back panel of the Mario Maker 2 collapsed, and everyone shot out of it, smashing into the stone crenellations that decorated the top of Castle Toadstool.

“It worked!” squeaked Goombaria, as she pulled a semi-conscious Goombario out of the pile and pulled him into a hug. “You’re okay! You were so freakin’ stupid and brave!”

Goombaria spotted Goombella in the pile and pulled her into a group hug. “And you! You promised to bring him home safe, and you really did! Now we can all go home together!”

Goombario and Goombella looked at each other, both with stupid smiles on their faces. “Toghether? What do you mean together?” said both Goombario and Goombella at once.

“Jinx!” said Goombaria.

As Goombaria pulled them all into a tighter hug, Goombario and Goombella glanced at each other, both stammering the same words at once. “But…we’re just…”

Goombaria snarled as she hugged them so tight, their cheeks puffed up. “Hey! No fair! I already jinxed you both! Now shut up and let me hug you!”

With a sigh, Goombario and Goombella glanced at one another, and returned the group hug.

Koops and Admiral Bobbery sat up, leaning against one another. Koops stammered. “Is…is this heaven?” Then Koopie Koo and Bombette dove at them and knocked them both to the ground, delivering kisses.

Lakilester dangled limply from his loyal cloud steed as he emerged from the pile, reeling. Shaking his skull, he gawked at the sight of the romantic couples smooching on all sides. “Ha! Look at you guys playing kissy-face in public. What, were you afraid we weren’t gonna make it? Well, I never had any doubts!”

A sweet, female voice called out from afar. “Lakileeesteeeer!” A spectacled Lakitu girl dove down from the clouds, before pulling Lakilester into a crushing bear hug. “I saw the news coverage and rushed straight to Toad Town!”

Lakilester froze, stammering. “L-Lakilulu? You came to find me…I…”

His eyes teared up. “...I was afraid I’d never see you again!”

“Oh, my poor Lakilester! You were so brave!” Lakilulu smooched Lakilester right on the lips.

All the others paused to coo at the sight. Lakilester blushed furiously. “Uh, Lakilulu, sweetie, could we save the kissies for–”

“Kissies now!” roared Lakilulu as she love tackled Lakilester, silencing his protests with furious smooching.

Lakilester didn’t protest for very long.

Vivian crawled out of the shadows, fixing the scorched remains of her witch hat. As she saw all her friends had made it out alive, and spotted Goombella in the group hug, Vivian smiled, and glided to the side to watch silently, from the shadow of the castle.

Mario and Peach arose, hugging each other tightly, before they both noticed what they were doing, and quickly stood, holding their hands stiffly at their sides.

“Peach?” said Mario.

“Mario?” said Peach.

Mario and Peach both stammered, saying the exact same words at the exact same time. “I’m sorry! Oh, don’t be sorry. I’m so glad you’re okay! Are you okay?”

The screen of the Mario Maker 2 flickered to life, and played the victory music. “Congratulations! This game’s winner is…Princess Daisy!”

Then it played a cut scene of Mario and Princess Peach, both represented by 8-bit video game sprites. The text over Peach’s head read. “Thank you, Mario! Your quest is over.”

Blushing, Peach ran to the Mario Maker and started pressing the power button, clearing her throat. “Ah, goodness, I thought I deleted that silly cutscene.”

Toadette blinked as she saw Mario slowly approach Peach on the screen. “Oh? This is the old security footage we recovered when Mario first rescued you, right Princess? I don’t think I’ve ever seen it before. I’ve never managed to finish the whole game all by–”

Peach pressed the power button furiously, then slammed her fist against it, shutting off the Mario Maker with a blip. Peach held up her hands, making finger guns, before thrusting her hands behind her back. “No need to watch these cheesy old home movies again! Am I right?”

Toadette cocked her head, like a confused puppy. “Huh? But it’s new to me. I’m dying to know what happened the first time Mario rescued you!”

Peach leaned against the control board, blocking Toadette from reaching the power button. “Oh, it’s nothing special! Pretty anti-climactic ending I’d say! You see…uh…”

Mario cleared his throat, as he appeared at Peach’s side. “You see…Bowser’s twin brother, Morton C. Koopa, showed up out of nowhere and, uh…kidnapped Princess Peach, again. Ain’t that right, Princess?”

Peach nodded furiously, looking relieved. “Precisely! That’s exactly what happened! A pretty boring ending to our first adventure, all things considered!”

Toadette put her hands on her hips. “Princess…what are you so bashful about? It can’t be all that bad! Let me guess: did you give Mario a chaste kiss? That’s nothing to be ashamed of!”

They all turned as they heard a familiar, booming voice, as Daisy pulled herself from the bottom of the dog pile, cradling Luigi in her arms. “Oh…man! Where am I? What was I–”

Daisy dropped Luigi’s limp body as she grabbed her head. “Omigosh! The race! We were all gonna die, but then…”

Daisy looked around at the entire group of friends, doing a quick mental count. “You’re all alive! We made it! Oh, you were all so brave and wonderful, I could just kiss you! No, scratch that, I *will* kiss you! All y’all deserve a great, big, sloppy kiss, right now!”

With that, Daisy quickly began smooching everyone in the group, even Princess Peach. As Luigi sat up, Daisy spotted him and dove on top of him, hooking her arm around his head and kissing him full on the lips…for a lot longer than she kissed anyone else.

Luigi’s chest heaved as he caught his breath, then glanced down at his bare chest. “Daisy? Why…where are my clothes?”

Daisy straightened, and thumbed one of Luigi’s overall straps with a grin. “Right here, chief.”

“But…why are you wearing them?”

Daisy sighed. “Luigi…A princess can’t challenge her mortal enemy to hand-to-hand combat, in a battle to the death, while wearing only her underpants. It simply wouldn’t be lady-like!”

Daisy looked around. “And speaking of that devil, where is he?”

Bowser groaned as he rolled out of the giant, 21-man dog pile.

Daisy jumped to her feet. “Bowser! You spoil-sport! You better come quietly!”

Bower rose to his feet, holding up his fists, before he tottered and stumbled onto one knee. “I…don’t…quit…”

Then the door to the tower burst open, and Captain Toad appeared, leading a company of Royal Toad Guards, armed with spears.

Captain Toad looked down with firm eyes. “Bowser, in the name of King Toadstool, I place you under arrest.”

Bowser swallowed as he felt the point of a spear pressed against his slender, graceful, feminine throat. “Well…discretion is the better part of valor!”

Captain Toad nodded, and withdrew his spear, without taking his eyes off of Bowser.

Then Daisy pinched Bowser by the ear, and gave it a little twist. “Finally! Now that you’re ready to admit defeat, we can address your astonishing, bad manners. C’mon, Bowser, a deal’s a deal!”

Bowser howled as Daisy yanked him up onto his feet. “Yow! Gid’off! What’re you…on about?”

Bowser trailed off as Daisy pressed a button on the Mario Maker. With a flicker of static, it blinked the words “This Game’s Winner is Princess Daisy!” before it tottered and flopped forward, with a final puff of smoke.

Bowser grimaced. “You…you can’t mean–yow!”

Daisy tugged Bowser along behind her, then sat down on the steaming remains of the Mario Maker, and patted her lap. “Oh yes I can mean, and yes I do mean! We both agreed that the winner of this race gets to spank the loser, and you are most definitely the loser of the day! Bowser, come lie across my knee. Bottoms up!”

The entire gathered crowd gasped. Peach covered her mouth. “Oh, Daisy, you mustn’t hold Bowser to that absurd dare. I’m sure he was only teasing, right Bowser?”

Bowser scowled. “Teasing? Of course I wanted to tease Daisy. I want to tease her the whole time I’m spanking her bratty, bare bottom, til she cries!”

Bowser pressed his lips shut as he heard what he had just admitted.

Daisy nodded. “I couldn’t agree more! There’s only one minor matter I want to settle, first. Mario? Luigi? Would either of you like the first crack at spanking Bowser? I’d say you two have earned the right to be first in line.”

Mario and Luigi glanced at each other, and exchanged a single, curt, nod. Mario stood straight, crossing his arms. “No, Daisy. It wouldn’t be right. A gentleman must never strike a lady!”

Still wearing only his briefs, Luigi matched Mario’s pose. “That’s right. Our Mama wouldn’t like it! And we don’t do nothin’ if it won’t make our Mama proud!”

As Mario and Luigi’s mustaches billowed majestically in the wind, a red kite soared overhead, letting out a regal cry. On the distant fortress walls, a series of green flags slowly arose, billowing majestically behind Mario and Luigi.

Daisy grinned. “Wow, I can respect that! Fortunately, I’m no gentleman, and Bowser…you’re no lady!”

Without further ceremony, Daisy roughly yanked on Bowser’s arm to pull him across her knees.

Despite Bowser’s strength, he discovered it’s surprisingly easy to get pulled into a spanking position. He just tripped, and found himself across Daisy’s lap.

“Gah! …Do we really have to do this right here? Right now? In front of–”

Daisy held up her index finger. “My Dad always says, ‘There’s no shame in accepting correction!’ …Dang, my Dad is so cool.”

Bowser pouted and crossed his arms, but showed no further signs of resistance. “Whatever. I’m a man of my word. Just get on with it.”

Peach bit her lip as she examined Bowser’s upturned hindquarters. Thanks to the lava, the torched remains of Bowser’s black skirt now revealed his heart-covered men’s boxers, which were snug against Bowser’s wide, womanly backside. It was now apparent that this was the only part of Bowser’s anatomy that had gained in girth, after his magical transformation into an otherwise delicate, dainty woman. Peach frowned. “Well, Bowser certainly deserves to be taught a lesson. It’s how any Princess would be disciplined at Princess Academy.”

Daisy clapped her white gloved hand across the lower center of Bowser’s buttocks. Bowser yipped like a puppy, then pressed his lips together. Daisy hummed. “Hmm…Bowser, we never agreed on the details of the spanking, did we?”

Bowser grit his teeth. “Do your worst. I’d have done the same for you. I was planning to spank you, without mercy, until I broke your spirit!”

Daisy beamed. “Aw, I’m flattered! In that case…”

Daisy delivered two more ferocious spanks, one to the center of each of Bowser's butt cheeks. "How about I give you ten spanks?"

Bowser snorted three times in a row. The first was a snort of surprise, the second was a snort of discomfort, and the third was a snort of derision. "Ten? Don't insult me. I'd rather–"

Daisy delivered seven spanks in quick succession, without sacrificing an ounce of her strength for a single stroke. Bowser choked and grunted. It suddenly occurred to him that, having watched Daisy deliver a mean fast ball pitch at the Mushroom Kingdom vs. Koopa Kingdom Baseball World Series over the years, he should have known that Daisy knew how to put her weight behind a swing of her arm.

With a flick of her wrist, Daisy patted Bowser's bottom a few times, playfully. "Ten spanks…for every single time you've kidnapped Princess Peach…"

Bowser's nostrils flared. "But…I don't remember how many–"

Daisy interrupted him by begging to spank at a brisk, steady pace. "Plus an *extra* spanking for being a bad sport during Princess Academy Morning Exercises today! No need for a precise number. I'll stop as soon as I'm sure you're really, truly sorry for your behavior!"

Bowser hissed and grunted as he and Daisy fell into a steady rhythm. He realized that it was like a dance. As long as he kept a cool head, he wouldn't break. "I'm…not…sorry! Eeek! Yipe!"

After Daisy landed a pair of particularly sound claps, she paused for a few beats. "Oh? …Shoot, this may take a while. Peach, do you recall how many times Bowser has kidnapped you?"

Then Daisy fell back into a steady spanking rhythm, this time leaving at least a full second between each spank, giving Bowser just enough time to make out the conversation.

Peach giggled. "Oh, my! Where to even begin? Does it count if he made a kidnapping attempt, but was thwarted right away?"

Mario had a perfect poker face as he strolled up next to Peach. "Well, the first time we met should definitely count. He turned the whole Mushroom Kingdom to stone with black magic, and kidnapped Peach to prevent her from restoring her people to life."

Luigi stroked his chin. "Then there was the Quest to Find the Lost Levels."

Peach looked mildly nostalgic. "Should that count? After all, it was his twin brother who kidnapped me that time, not Bowser himself."

Mario raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, but under Bowser's direct orders."

Daisy landed a resounding slap, then paused. “Yeah, that one should definitely count. You guys keep counting, and I’ll multiply the total number by ten. I’ll just ‘keep the seat warm’ in the meantime.”

As Daisy began to spank Bowser anew, Peach giggled. “I agree, orchestrating a kidnapping is just as serious an offense as carrying it out personally! …Oh, there was the time I visited your world, Mario. I still remember our trip to the lovely nation of Japan…Before Bowser kidnapped all those poor men and women from the All Night Nippon Radio Station.”

Daisy nodded, without pausing the spanking. “Did Bowser kidnap you, or just the radio personalities?”

“Oh, he definitely kidnapped me that time. I remember the charming conversation I had with the other victims before he transformed them into his mind-controlled zombie minions.”

By now, Bowser had started humming to hide his other sounds of discomfort.

Captain Toad joined the group, resting on his spear like a walking stick. “Then I returned to the Mushroom Kingdom from my Fungal Research, and we had to rescue the world of Subcon.”

Mario crossed his arms. “Hold on, I thought that was all just a dream.”

Luigi shook his head. “No, no, we all *thought* it was just a dream, but then Subcon turned out to be real, and we had to save it again.”

Peach pulled out a calculator and started typing. “So that’s two separate, unprovoked wars of aggression.”

Bowser squealed like a girl. “Yeeeeaaaiiiii! Wait! Wait!”

Daisy scowled, and increased the tempo of her spanking slightly. “Hey! Don’t just butt into a conversation. Say, ‘Excuse me,’ first! Man, I must have gotten spanked for that twice a week back at Princess Academy.”

Bowser hissed as he made a valiant effort to make his voice sound deep and steady. “…Tss…Well, *excuse me*, Princess, but that wasn’t me, that was King Wart! I wasn’t involved!”

Peach cooed. “That’s right! And King Wart never kidnapped me. Thank you for reminding me Bowser. We don’t want to be unfair, after all!”

Bowser caterwauled as Daisy increased the speed of her swats again. Then Daisy pursed her lips. “Hang on…Didn’t Bowser say he was gonna’ spank me on my bare butt? Cuz in that case…”

Bowser's eyes popped wide open as Daisy pinched the elastic waistband of Bowser's boxers, and tugged them down with one, clean yank.

Slowly, Daisy raised her hand high.

Then the door burst open, and Peach's most loyal counselor, old Toadsworth, stumbled onto the tower, his mustache puffing as he leaned on his walking stick. "Princcess Peach! Princess Daisy! You're alive! Are you hurt? Where is…"

Toadsworth's glasses flew off his face as he spotted Bowser lying prone over Princess Daisy's knee. "Is that…Bowser? Oh, sweet truffles…"

Another elderly toad, Professor Toadsky, darted out the door. His toothbrush mustache bristled as he swung a thin, teacher's pointing rod with dangerous precision. "...and it's all the fault of Crown Princess Toadstool! Ooh, just wait until the Council of Elders hears about this! Not to mention the Mushroom University Board of Governors, and the Toad Teachers Union, and the Red-Cap Political Action Committee, and the Circumlocution Office…and…and…"

Daisy froze as her hand hovered high in the air above Bowser's bare, blushing red backside.

Professor Toadsky choked. "...and the Ambassador for the Koopa Kingdom."

[End of Chapter XX]

Bowsette's Princess Lessons
Chapter XXI: A Happy Ending?

After their long ordeal, Toadette insisted that everyone head straight to the castle infirmary for a much-needed rest. But Toadsworth and Princess Peach absolutely insisted that they needed a moment to speak with one another…alone. In the end, Mario, Luigi, and Daisy agreed to help Toadette see the rest of the company to their hospital beds, before returning to await Peach.

In the grand hallway outside of Toadsworth's private office, Mario and Daisy paced back and forth like two caged tigers. Luigi twiddled his thumbs, in an unsuccessful attempt to disguise his nerves. Toadette gave no hint of her inner rage. But there was a definite edge to Toadette's voice. "Oooh! I can't believe that Toadsworth! After all we've been through, Princess Peach should be in the infirmary, resting her body and mind. What could Toadsworth possibly have to tell her that's so urgent, it couldn't wait until *after* she recovered from traumatic brain injury?"

Daisy dug her fingers into her hair. "There's only one possible explanation! Toadsworth is probably giving Peach the spanking of her life, and it's all my fault! If I hadn't spanked Bowser, none of this would have happened! Now, poor Peach is gonna have traumatic *butt* injury!"

Luigi coughed, glancing askance at the ornate wooden doors that led to Toadsworth's office. "...Uh, what makes you say that, Daisy? I'm sure they're just having a rational discussion, like two mature adults."

"Yeah! A thorough, pains-taking discussion! One where Toadsworth's hand is saying, 'Whack, smack, twhack! Whackity-whack!' to Peach's poor, precious patootie! I just know that's exactly what's happening! Ooh, lemme listen!"

Daisy pressed her ear against the door, then leapt back, shaking her fists at the sky. "I can't hear nothin'! Curse these impenetrable, sound-proof doors! How long must I stay in suspense?"

The door creaked open, and two retainers poked their heads out. The first was a blue Toad with thick spectacles. The second was a pink Toad girl with two blond pigtail buns, a little younger than Toadette.

Mario froze. "Toadbert! Toadiko!"

Toadbert adjusted his glasses. "Master Toadsworth and her royal highness, Crown Princess Peach, are prepared to see you."

Daisy shoved past everyone, sending Toadbert and Todiko spiraling like two tops. "Peach! We're coming! I've got an emergency pillow you can sit on!"

Toadiko held her head as she came spinning to a halt. "Woah…emergency pillow? What's that?"

Mario and Luigi both shrugged, in their distinctly Italian-American manner. “Eh, fuggedaboutit!” they both said, at once.

Toadbert picked his glasses before following them down a minor corridor. “Um, generally speaking, we’re supposed to announce you before–”

Daisy thrust open the second set of doors and burst into Toadsworth’s office. “All right, what’s the damage?”

They all found Toadsworth seated behind his mahogany work desk, while Peach sat opposite him, looking abashed. Peach rubbed her cheek, blushing madly. “…Hello, everyone…I’m sorry, it looks like I made a royal mess of things. Toadsworth says we all need to have a chat about what comes next.”

Toadsworth rang a small bell on his desk. “Toadbert! Toadiko! Please fetch me the Switch.”

Daisy roared to the heavens. “A switch? I knew it! That means spanking!”

Toadsworth’s mustache drooped in shock. “Spanking? Princess Daisy, what are you–”

Toadette held up her hands, her eyes pleading. “Don’t do it, Toadsworth! Don’t spank Peach!”

Princess Daisy sprinted to face Toadsworth and slammed her palms on the top of the desk. “Yeah! Spank me instead!”

Toadsworth almost tipped over backwards in his chair. “But, I’m not going to spank you, Daisy. I’m only–”

Daisy slammed her fist down on the desk. “You’re *only* going to spank Peach? Outrageous! That’s not fair, and you know it! I won’t stand for this injustice! Look, I’m the one who spanked Bowser. It was all my idea! I’m the only one who should get spanked! Me!”

Princess Peach stood up, holding her hand over her heart. “No, I can’t let you do that, Daisy. I was the one who orchestrated the plan. I was the one who was responsible for Bowser. It is I, and I alone, who should be punished.”

Toadsworth looked back and forth at each of the Princesses, as if his head was on a swivel. “But, but, but–”

Daisy bent over Toadsworth’s desk, assuming the position for a caning, and pointed at her upturned rear end. “Yes! Right on my butt! Just promise me you won’t spank Peach!”

Toadsworth waved his hands. “But…I’m not going to spank Peach! I’m–”

Peach pointed a finger in Toadsworth's face. "Master Toadsworth! Don't you dare let Daisy badger you out of doing your royal duty!"

Daisy pumped a fist and pointed a finger at Peach's face. "Ha! Too late, Peach! He promised! Which means I'm the only one getting spanked today! Luigi, get over here and help Toadsworth spank me."

Luigi looked left and right, and found no one else in the room named Luigi. "Me? But, but, but—"

Daisy seized Luigi by his overall straps and led him to the desk. "Yes! You have to spank my *butt!* That's the whole idea! Don't worry, Luigi, you'll get the hang of it right away."

To Luigi's horror, Daisy sat him down roughly on Toadsworth's desk, then crawled across his lap, lying bottoms up. "Now, I can get a bit feisty during a spanking, so whatever you do, make sure you don't give me an inch. If I bite or kick, just lay one on me to show me who's in charge. I'm a wild, untamable spirit, and it's your job to tame me, by tanning my hide!"

Without pausing to take a breath, Daisy lifted her hips and pulled aside her yellow sash, revealing her "Hi! I'm Daisy!" pants to Luigi's stunned gaze. Daisy gestured emphatically to her backside as she continued her lecture. "Concentrate on spanking the lower area of my booty, right here, where I've got the most padding. Spank me hard, with firm, steady, deliberate strokes. Once you've got my attention, just keep paddling me without mercy, until my butt is bright red, and I'm reduced to a sobbing mess of girlish tears."

Luigi's face turned pale. "Daisy! I could never hit you!"

Daisy sat up, holding Luigi's hands tight in hers. "I'm not asking you to hit me, Luigi. I'm asking you to spank me, with love. There's a big difference! I'm trusting you to give me the spanking I have coming, because I know you're a man worthy of that trust. And when my spanking is finally over, I want you to cradle me in your lap and comfort me. Give me head pats, and tell me I took my spanking like a big, brave girl. Then give me a little kiss and tell me everything is forgiven. Well, go on, Luigi! Do what you have to do!"

As Daisy flopped back down over Luigi's lap, Princess Peach grabbed Luigi roughly by the collar. "No! Don't do it, Luigi! Stand on your principles!"

Still lying bottoms up, Daisy lifted her head, baring her fangs at Peach. "Hey! Butt out, Peach! I'm taking your spanking for you, and that's that!"

Toadsworth waved his walking stick in the air, stammering. "Wait, wait, wait! Daisy, you don't need to take a spanking for Princess Peach!"

Daisy grinned. "Well, duh. I'm not doing this for Peach because I *need* to. I'm doing this for Peach because I *want* to, because that's what friends do!"

As Peach began to argue with Daisy a horrifying thought occurred to her. *“Oh, no! If Luigi is going to spank Daisy, does that mean…Mario is going to spank me!?!””*

Peach spun to find Mario, marching toward the desk, with a stern look on his face. All of a sudden, Peach experienced a vivid daydream: Mario seizing her by the wrist, before wordlessly taking her across his knee…

Then Mario rounded the desk, staring Toadsworth dead in the eyes. “Toadsworth, you can’t do this. Princess Peach and Princess Daisy did nothing wrong. Neither of them deserve to be punished.”

Peach sighed with relief. Of course! Mario was a gentleman! He would never consent to spank her!

…Though Peach had a strange feeling that if he had consented to spank her, she’d have happily consented to accept it.

Peach’s internal argument was interrupted when Toadsworth rapped his walking stick down sharply against his desk, with enough force to silence everyone. “But I’m not going to spank Princess Peach at all! I was never going to give Princess Peach a spanking in the first place!”

Everyone blinked. “You’re not?” said Mario, Luigi, Toadette, Peach, and Daisy, all at once.

Peach released her grasp on Luigi, and stood to attention. “But, Toadsworth, why did you grab me by the hand and say, ‘Princess Peach, you and I need to have a serious talk!’ in such a foreboding manner?"

Toadsworth facepalmed. “Because I wanted to talk to you!”

Luigi glanced at the door. “But…what about the switch you asked for?”

Toadbert and Toadiko appeared at the door, carrying a small video game console.

“Here you are, Master Toadsworth! The Wintendo Switch!” said Toadbert, as he set it on the desk.

Toadiko activated the device with the twin Joycon controllers. “We’ve already loaded the Koopa News Network channel for you.”

With a bow and a curtsey, Toadbert and Todiko excused themselves.

Daisy glanced back at her panty-clad behind, and zipped like a lightning bolt to stand at Peach's side, tying the yellow sash to cover herself. "...So, to clarify, you did *not* summon Princess Peach to your office for a bare-butt beatdown?"

Toadsworth rubbed his eyes behind his glasses. "Sigh…That is correct, Princess Daisy."

Daisy elbowed Peach, with a teasing smile. "Wow, he's letting you off easy, Peach!"

Mario crossed his arms. "Well, then what was so urgent? We beat Bowser, and he's back in his cell. Problem solved."

Toadsworth shook his head. "I'm afraid it's not that simple, Master Mario. If you would all please have a seat…"

Toadsworth pressed a button on the Joycon, and the miniature television screen on the Wintendo Switch flicked on. A logo appeared, joined by dramatic classical music, and a deep, booming voice. "Koopa News Network: All The News We Make, We Fake."

A pair of Koopa Troopas appeared on screen, one wearing a silver-grey toupee with a green suit and tie, the other wearing a blond wig with a red pantsuit with matching lipstick. The trailing chiron below the screen declared a series of horrendous-sounding headlines.

The green Koopa looked at the camera, leaning on his desk to look serious. "Lord Bowser Koopa, a beloved war hero, has been kidnapped. While making a diplomatic mission to the Mushroom Kingdom to deliver a message of love, peace, and unity to the Royal Court of King Toadstool, the champion of the Turtle Tribe was kidnapped by none other than Princess Toadstool."

The red Koopa filed her nails. "He can do much better than her, in my unbiased and objective opinion!"

"We now bring you exclusive footage, shot live on the scene."

The feed cut to show a shaky video which had clearly been shot on a phone camera. Princess Peach was laughing maniacally. "Mwa ha ha! Oh, Bowser, darling? Prepare to be kidnapped by me, the evil Peach, Princess Toadstool of Mushroom Kingdom!"

"Peaches! You're kidnapping me? That's diabolical! I'm so–"

The video cut off sharply, and the two Koopas reappeared, looking stern. "According to the royal vizier, Kammy Koopa, King Bowser was magically transformed into the form of a woman during the altercation."

The feed cut to Kammy Koopa, speaking into several microphones. “I saw it with my own eyes! The moment the Crown of Queen Toadstool was placed upon his head, King Bowser transformed into…well, Queen Bowser, I guess. I’m flabbergasted. How could the Mushroom Kingdom have access to such dangerous, arcane sorcery?”

Toadette stamped her foot, her pigtails flying. “Those…liars!”

Peach gently shushed Toadette and gestured to the screen of the Switch.

On the newscast, a crowd of journalists all shouted to ask their question first. “Why would Peach do this to him? Is she some kind of sicko?”

“Is she some kind of psycho?”

“Can the process be reversed?”

“Can the process be repeated?”

“How soon are we going to bomb the Mushroom Kingdom?”

Kammy waved her hands. “One at a time! One at a time! Now, as the Koopa Kingdom’s preeminent expert on ancient magic…I have no idea. Once I ascertained that Lord Bowser had been taken captive, I immediately returned to the Koopa Kingdom to renew my research on the Crown of Queen Toadstool. With additional government funding, I am confident we will get to the bottom of this.”

A shaky, old man’s voice barked from off screen. “Wait, you left Lord Bowser behind?”

Kammy Koopa pulled at the collar of her witch’s cape. “Well, in a manner of speaking. But only because I was in a hurry to return home to…Oh! Hello, Master Kamek! Fancy meeting you–Ack!”

Kamek, a decrepit Magikoopa even older than Kammy, charged on screen and pinched Kammy by the ear. (Although Koopas don’t have any ears, this doesn’t make them immune to having their ears pinched by a parental figure.) “You abandoned your post, Kammy? Disgraceful! I trained you better than that. There’s only one fitting punishment for such cowardice!"

“Capital punishment?” asked one of the assembled journalists.

Kamek shook his head. “No, far worse. *Corporal* punishment!”

“Oh, no! Not that! Anything but that!” wailed Kammy Koopa.

Kamek took a seat and easily bent Kammy over his knee, stretching his gnarled old arm. “Hush, you whippersnapper. You’re long overdue for a long, hard spanking! Just like the ones I used to give you when you were a trouble-making apprentice!”

Kammy trembled as she twisted over her shoulder to look pleadingly at her old teacher. “But…but I’m a senior member of the Koopa Cabinet!”

Kamek lifted Kammy’s robe up to reveal a pair of granny-style bloomers, and exhaled onto his palm. “Well, that just goes to show, you’re never too old for a good spanking.”

Mugging at the camera with a resigned look on her face, Kammy shrugged. “Well, you got me there.”

With that, Kamek began to spank Kammy Koopa soundly, raising a cloud of dust with every swat across her dusty drawers. Kammy whooped and hollered. “Yeeaaah! Oh, I *never* should have gone into politics!”

Kamek didn’t pause the spanking as he lectured Kammy. “Now, now, Kammy, don’t beat yourself up. That’s my job. You have talent. All you need is a few more decades of experience, and then you’ll be ready to take over for me as Second-in-Command of Bowser’s Army.”

Kammy’s eyes teared up as she endured the ongoing spanking. “Ow! You…you really think so, sensei? Yeeowch!”

Kamek sighed, but with less exasperation. “I *know* so. Because I’m going to spank you until you’re the finest evil henchman who ever served the Great Demon King!”

Then Kamek snapped his head up to address the assembled journalists. “And as soon as I’m done teaching this youngster a lesson, I’m declaring Martial Law and whipping up an army the likes of which the Mushroom Kingdom has never seen! …And Princess Toadstool, if you’re watching, you’d best take great care of Lord Koopa, or all that’s left of the Mushroom Kingdom…will be a mushroom cloud.”

The feed cut back to the two journalists. The Green Koopa nodded, looking grave. “There you have it, folks, a message of strength and unity in these trying times.”

The Red Koopa fanned herself. “Just what is needed in these times of trouble! A firm, guiding hand! But what of Lord Bowser’s poor children?”

“Indeed. Shortly after that interview, Chancellor Kamek formally invoked the emergency powers granted to him under The Law of the Great Demon King, to act as the temporary Lord Protector of the Koopa Kingdom and Regent to the throne, until such time as Lord Bowser is returned safely…or until such time as Prince Bowser, Junior, comes of age. One of our reporters

harassed–er, had an opportunity to speak to the young Prince outside of the Koopa Kid Kindergarten."

The feed cut to a camera shot of Bowser Junior, wearing the sky blue shirt and yellow hat that represented a Koopa Kindergarten uniform. A journalist shoved a mic into the child's face. "Prince Bowser! Mario and Princess Peach have kidnapped your father! Your father may never come home! You're all alone! What are you gonna' do?"

Bowser Junior rounded on the reporter, breathing fire. "What? Where's my Papa? Give him back, right now!"

Bowser Junior picked up the reporter and physically threw him through the brick wall of the elementary school, before rounding on the camera man and tackling him to the ground. "Mario! I'll show you! We Koopas are a family! And our family *always* sticks together!"

The feed ended abruptly, returning to the two Koopa TV anchors. The Red Koopa shrieked. "The poor children! Won't somebody, please, think of the children?"

The Green Koopa shook his head, bemused. "Well, I know *someone* who always thinks of the children: Lord Bowser, father of eight, and father of the year. We're happy to report that one of our undercover reporters has managed to confirm that Bowser is alive and well, despite being subject to inhumane and un-turtlish treatment! We have learned that, just this morning, Lord Bowser was apparently forced to run a deadly, obstacle course of *doom*, using an advanced magical weapon identified as The Mario Maker! This devious death trap was designed by none other than–you guessed it–Princess Peach! In this on-the-ground footage, we see Princess Peach's obstacle course collapsing."

The Red Koopa sniffed. "I suppose Princess Peach couldn't be bothered to contract a Koop-O.S.H.A. safety inspector."

The Green Koopa sneered. "We can only suppose. Look carefully at this footage, and you can clearly see Mario and Princess Toadstool, falling towards certain destruction."

"Through no fault but their own!"

"When *whomst* should arrive to save the day but…Lord Bowser himself…herself?"

The feed cut to show a distant camera shot, which zoomed in to show Bowser flying through the air to catch Princess Peach and Mario. "Peaches! Don't worry, baby! Daddy's coming for ya'!"

Peach stood to get a closer look at the screen. "How did they get that footage?"

Luigi looked stern. "It must have been one of Bowser's Lakitu spies!"

On the news feed, the Red Koopa TV anchor almost swooned as they replayed the footage of Bowser flying, with Superman music added for dramatic, truth-enhancing effect. “Oooh! What a man…woman? Wait, how are we supposed to refer to Lord Bowser now? I just can’t keep up with all these new pronouns!”

The Green Koopa fidgeted with his tie. “Um…can we get a check on that from the network censor? At any rate, despite Lord Bowser’s heroic action, it seems that Princess Peach had devised still more sadistic torments. An anonymous whistleblower also sent us this shocking footage. Parents of impressionable children be warned! Viewer discretion is advised.”

The feed cut to show Bowser kicking and squirming over Daisy’s knee, as Daisy spanked him/her atop the tower of Toadstool Fortress. The camera angle was shot from a high, bird’s eye view, probably from the very top of one of the castle towers. From the distance Daisy looked like a few green and blue pixels on the screen, but the sound of the spanking was unmistakable.

Daisy choked. “Oh, crud. Wait til my Dad sees this.”

Peach shook her head. “A spy? Inside my castle? Captain Toad needs to be alerted at once!”

Toadsworth sighed. “...He is already aware.”

On the screen of the Switch, the two Koopa TV anchors were shaking their heads. The Green Koopa was milking the drama for all he was worth. “That’s right, dear viewers…Torture! We can confirm that, under the direct orders of Princess Peach, Lord Bowser was spanked by none other than that meddlesome coward, Number 2 on the Elite Koopatrol’s Most Wanted List, Luigi Mario!”

Luigi gestured to himself. “Me?”

The Green Koopa shook his finger, as if he could hear Luigi through the screen. “That’s right! You can see it with your own eyes! Luigi spanked Bowser! Are there no depths of depravity to which Princess Peach will not sink in her mad quest for revenge? And what crime has Lord Bowser committed, except to devote himself tirelessly to the cause of uniting our long-divided Kingdom? Is it a crime…to love?”

The Red Koopa applied a fresh coat of lipstick. “If you want my opinion, Princess Peach is in dire need of a good spanking, herself.”

The Green Koopa held up a finger. “Many would agree with that opinion. But fortunately, we don’t deal with opinions on the Koopa News Network. On this network, we deal with just the facts. And now, a word from our sponsor!”

A jazzy jingle started to play, over footage of a field of oil rigs. “Dinosaur Land Petroleum. Though our partnership with O.P.E.C. the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, we’re bringing power to families across the Koopa Kingdom.”

Peach stood tall, shaking her head. “I’ve heard enough, Toadsworth. Please turn it off.”

Toadsworth flicked off the Wintendo Switch, shaking his head.

Toadette grabbed her ponytails, gnashing her teeth. “Oooh…those fibbers! What kind of awful person thinks it’s okay to just…lie through their teeth like that?”

“Journalists,” said Mario and Luigi, at the same time.

Toadsworth nodded. “But knowing Kamek, those threats are just bluster. I’ll send a peace envoy to the Koopa Kingdom to assure him that Bowser is being treated with utmost respect…as a guest of the Mushroom Kingdom.”

Mario’s mustache seemed to crackle. “A guest? After all that monster did? We should lock him up, and lose the key!”

Luigi stroked his chin. “Hold on, a guest? Peach, that’s what Bowser always calls you, after he kidnaps you.”

Peach nodded. “Exactly, Luigi. Throughout our history, royal families have often kept their enemies under close watch as ‘royal guests.’ It’s a polite fiction. By calling me a ‘guest,’ rather than a ‘prisoner,’ The Koopa Kingdom can avoid making a declaration of open war with the Mushroom Kingdom.”

Daisy looked pensive. “Huh, I always figured you get kidnapped so often, everybody just…got used to it.”

Peach took a slow, deliberate breath. “Well, *I* certainly haven’t gotten used to it. But no one wants a state of war between the Mushroom Kingdom and the Koopa Kingdom, not even Bowser. We’re too evenly matched in military strength.”

Mario ripped off his hat and rifled his fingers through his hair. “So, what, we have to let Bowser go? Because he’s a King, he can get away with doing whatever he wants?”

Toadsworth shook his head. “Not necessarily. But we have to be delicate. As long as Bowser is our ‘guest,’ we can always ‘request’ that the Koopa Kingdom concede some ‘minor’ territories. We can gently ‘remind’ them to finally acknowledge some of the finer terms of our Peace Treaty.”

Mario fixed his cap. “I could never do your job, Toadsworth. Politics makes me sick.”

Toadsworth took off his spectacles, looking tired. “It’s dirty work. But someone has to do it. Bowser is a problem that requires all of us to work together. Which brings me to my main point. Princess Peach, you really ought to have told me what you had planned for Princess…er, King Bowser.”

Peach hung her head. “I know. I’m sorry, Toadsworth. I was so excited by our plan, I got ahead of myself.”

Princess Daisy pointed two finger guns at Toadsworth. “You sure you don’t want to spank us?”

Toadsworth chuckled, and pulled out a clipboard. As he flipped through it, he revealed Bowser’s signature at the bottom. “Quite sure. It was a brash plan…but it wasn’t a bad plan. You learned that Bowser is as dangerous as ever. Whose idea was it to get Bowser to sign the Princess Academy Code of Conduct?”

Daisy sat on Toadsworth’s desk, pointing a thumb at her chest. “It was a team effort! I came up with the original idea! And Peach refined it!”

Luigi craned his neck to get a look at the clipboard. “What is the Princess Academy Code of Conduct, anyway?”

“It’s a sacred oath. A set of principles that guide any true Princess of the Realm. And in this instance, let’s just say it gives us…leverage. Bowser has legally agreed to be treated as a Princess, and a guest, in Peach’s castle.”

Mario nodded, drumming his fingers on his arm. “Meaning…”

Peach giggled. “Meaning that Bowser is *not* a prisoner. But he *is* under our legal protection and authority, right where we want him. Kamek can toot his horn all he wants, but he has no just cause to declare war on the Mushroom Kingdom.”

“And what if Kamek doesn’t care about having a *just* cause? What if he starts a war, *just cuz’* he feels like it?”

Peach and Toadsworth glanced at each other. Finally, Toadsworth answered. “You’re exactly right, Mario. That’s why I’m going to have to do the dirty politics, and we’re all going to have to be *very* careful with Bowser. Which leads me to my next order of business…Princess Peach, I’d like you to take over the preparations for the Grand Mushroom Kingdom Ball.”

Peach raised an eyebrow. “The Ball? But won’t you need my help more on affairs of state? You’re not still cross with me, are you?”

“It’s not a punishment. I want to have all the royal guests from the neighboring kingdoms see that *Princess* Bowser is, indeed, our honored guest, and not a prisoner clapped in irons. I can’t think of anything better to take the wind out of the sails of Kamek’s warships.”

Peach raised both eyebrows. “But, Toadsworth, you saw the damage Bowser did yourself. Despite his appearance, he’s as wild and uncontrollable as ever.”

“That’s why I’m trusting you with this task, Princess Peach. By the time of the Ball…Bowser will need to be civilized.”

Peach nodded. “I understand, Toadsworth. I won’t let you down.”

Luigi’s lip trembled. “You…don’t mean…”

Mario narrowed his eyes. “...You want *us*…to teach *Bowser*…”

Toadette clutched her heart. “...to behave like a proper Princess?”

Daisy grinned mischievously. “Oh, I can’t wait.”

…

Bowser pouted as he was escorted to his dungeon cell by Captain Toad and the Royal Toad Guard. After the iron bars slammed shut behind him, Bowser stomped toward his fold-out bed. The moment he sat down, Bowser squealed and leapt to his feet. “Stupid Daisy and her stupid spanking bet!”

Lying gingerly on the bed, Bowser twisted onto his side, face against the wall, looking thoroughly butt-hurt, in every possible sense of the word. “Stupid Mario, stupid Luigi, and their stupid teamwork, and their stupid friends, and their stupid power of friendship…Stupid Peach and her stupid friend zone…I’ll get even.”

Bowser’s eyelids sagged, and with a final shiver, he drifted into a fitful sleep.

Across from Bowser’s sleeping form, two eyes, blue as ice, appeared in the mirror. Then, the woman in the mirror pressed her hand against the glass, her blond hair tumbling around her face in a wild nest.

Slowly, the woman stepped through the mirror, and crawled toward Bowser, step by step.

…

Bowser was back in his childhood nursery. Morton was cowering under the crib. The Great Demon King was hammering at the door, before the monster kicked the door off its hinges,

snapping the chain lock off the wall. As little baby Bowser was sent flying, Bowser shook his head and turned to walk away. “Nope. New dream.”

The room melted and reformed around him, and Bowser was back in the divorce courtroom. The legally-blind judge pounded his gavel, then swiveled in his chair, doing his best impression of Ed Sullivan. “In the matter of Koopa v. Koopa, court is now in session. Good evening ladies and germs, we have a lovely *shew* for you today. Today I’d like to tackle the matter of custody for the…seven children? …Oh, boy, that’s a lot of names. I understand that all seven children are the biological children of Mizz Claudia Koopa, and were legally adopted by Lord Bowser Koopa on the day of your marriage, correct?”

Bowser yawned, and stomped out of the courtroom. “This again? I already know how this story ends. Come on, where’s the action? Where’s the suspense? Where’s the romance? Where is…the…tragedy?”

Bowser was in the observation room aboard the flying Koopa Fortress, surrounded by shattered TV screens. The alarms blared, and he saw something spiraling through the air as Claudia Koopa and King Wart flew away, oblivious. “No! My egg! My baby! Kammy, where are you?”

The screens blazed red, and the Mario Intrusion Alert System rang a shrill siren. “Mario, again? Mario, Mario…It’s always *Mario!* I’ll *KILL* him!!”

And sure enough, here was the all-mighty Star Rod in his hand. Holding it aloft, Bowser charged out the door, and knew that his wish was granted. Everything began to move very slowly, and very fast, all at once, as if Bowser was underwater and in the midst of a tornado.

Mario emerged to face him, followed by a group of 8 of his pathetic followers. Then, the Seven Star Spirits flew into formation above Mario’s head, their bodies glowing with holy light.

Bowser heard Princess Peach scream and rush to join Mario, before Kammy Koopa flew to intercept her. Bowser chuckled as he noticed Princess Peach had an insignificant little friend of her own. A baby star they’d caught sneaking around trying to chit-chat with Peach. Yes, “Twink.” That was the wimpy little star’s wimpy little name. No need to worry about those two. Bowser rounded on Mario, and called upon the Star Rod to grant his wish: to be invincible.

Bowser savored the memory of stomping Mario into the ground, laughing as Mario’s friends bounced uselessly off him in every direction. Bowser shivered with ecstasy as he held aloft the Star Rod, and smote the Seven Star Spirits themselves with his magic.

Bowser laughed, triumphant, victorious, when something small bounced off the back of his head, no bigger than a pebble. Scratching the back of his head, Bowser spotted Peach, her hands folded in prayer, and in front of him…a baby star. Peach’s insignificant little friend, Twink. Then, Mario got back on his feet, and as Twink flickered, his light no greater than that of a firefly,

the Seven Star Guardians trembled, and arose from the ground. Then Mario's 8 companions awoke from their unconsciousness, and leapt to Mario's side.

And as Bowser felt a tickle, he looked down, and saw the invincible power of the Star Rod begin to fade from his grasp, its rainbow aura dissipating like water.

Bowser remembered Mario kicking him in the face, then a hammer smashing down on his skull. He remembered falling through the clouds into nothingness, miles above the earth below. He saw both his and Peach's castles tumbling through the sky, before the Seven Star Spirits flew below Peach, Mario, and all their little friends, and caught them all up in a sphere of iridescent magic. As Peach's castle floated lightly away, light as a bubble, Bowser and Kammy Koopa fell, along with their mighty fortress and the entire Koopatrol, and smashed into the ground.

Bowser, of course, survived. There were days of assembling the survivors into a fighting force, followed by weeks of work to recover anything useful from the smashed remains of the fortress. And all the while, Bowser knew there was no hope of forming a rescue party to recover his lost child. Even by the time he had seen the alert, it had already been too late. Without the incubator, the egg would never hatch. And even if it did, the child would be hopelessly lost, and all alone.

Leaving his troops behind, Bowser found a secluded spot in the midst of the ruins, next to the smashed remains of two giant statues, both formed in Bowser's own image. Sitting on a rock, Bowser wept. "All I wanted…was a family."

Then, Bowser stiffened as he heard a woman's voice echoing from within the statue to his left. "Your heir…your legacy…gone forever…because of Mario…"

Bowser twisted to look at the cracked stone statue of his own face. "Huh? Who is there?"

The woman's voice seemed to creep forth from the mouth of the statue, like solid darkness on the air. "I am you. I am what you can become. Come to me. You have only to reach out your hand, and I will grant your most cherished wish…revenge."

Bowser's eyes watered as he stumbled toward the statue on his left. "Mario…took my child…"

But just as Bowser reached out to the statue on his left, a small child's voice roared out of the mouth of the giant statue on his right. "Hey! Quit that cry-baby routine! It's my nappy time!"

Bowser quickly wiped away his tears, putting up his dukes. "Who's there? Come on out and fight! I'll give you something to cry about!"

A baby Koopa, still wearing his egg shell as his only form of clothing, popped out of the statue. "You're the one who's crying! Like a big, fat baby!"

Bowser got in the kid's face. "Call me a baby, will ya? What's your name and rank, soldier?"

The kid got right in Bowser's face. "I'm Koopa Junior, Mr. Big Baby. And I dunno what a rank is!"

Smoke billowed from Bowser's nostrils as he snatched the child up in one fist. "So, a deserter, eh? Looks like I'll have to make an example outta' you. You and me are gonna' fight! And the fight ain't over til one of us cries, 'Uncle!'"

"You're on, Big Baby! What's an Uncle?"

Bowser sneered. "It means I'm bigger than you, and I'm older than you, so I'm better than you."

"Are you my Uncle?"

Bowser rolled his eyes, then strolled into the midst of his warcamp, holding the child high above his head. "No! I'm not your Uncle kid. Hey, everyone! Gather round! We're gonna have a little one-on-one wrestling match, and you're all invited to watch! This here is…Koopa…Junior…"

Groups of Koopas, Goombas, and other underlings started to gather on all sides, a murmur traveling through the crowd. Everyone loved watching Lord Bowser lay a brutal, professional-wrestling-style smackdown on any unfortunate soldier who got too big for their britches.

Bowser blinked and took a closer look at the kid. "Wait a minute, where are your parents?"

Koopa Junior rolled his eyes. "Ugh! My Mommy dropped me out of an airplane. The next thing I know, I hatch out of my egg, and see this short, fat loser with a big bushy mustache wearing a red hat, so naturally I try to kick his butt, and you know what he did? He had the nerve to fight back!"

"Wait, you fought Mario?"

"Yeah, I fought Mario! Cuz when I was in my egg, my Daddy told me that I was gonna grow up to be big and strong and kick butt, especially the butts of anybody named Mario!"

Koopa Junior kicked free from Bowser's grip, and landed on his butt. The eggshell that represented his only clothing cracked as he fell on his booty. Then Koopa Junior stood up and pointed a finger at Bowser's face. "And when I'm done kicking your big, fat, baby butt, I'm gonna find my Daddy!"

"...Your…Daddy?"

"Yeah! My Daddy is the one and only Bowser Koopa! So there's no way I'm gonna lose to a baby-butt, idiot, stink-head like you!"

Hearts appeared in Bowser's eyes as he scooped up Koopa Junior. "Koopa Junior! You're alive! You're here! You've gotten so big!"

Koopa Junior kicked and punched wildly, before he froze. "Hey! No fair! Put me down so I can punch your…Wait, are you my Daddy?"

"Yes! Yes, I'm your Daddy! And you're my baby! You're my Koopa Junior!"

Koopa Junior's eyes went wide. "...Daddy?"

Then Koopa Junior's egg shell cracked and fell off, showing his cute baby butt to the entire assembled army. Bowser gasped. "It's a boy! I'm a father! I have a bouncing baby boy! That means you need a new name! I'm gonna name you…Bowser Junior!"

Bowser Koopa Junior pumped his fists. "Yes! I love my name! Now let's you an' me fight, Daddy!"

Bowser set Junior down and put up his fists. "Oh, you bet we're gonna fight, Junior! We're gonna fight all day! Put up your dukes! Everyone, cheer for my son!"

Above the scene, the woman in the mirror emerged from the gaping mouth of the smashed statue of Bowser. "...So, the child survived?"

In the midst of the father-son bare-knuckle boxing match, Bowser and Bowser Junior both froze, with their fists in mid air. Junior glanced up at the statue. "Say, Daddy, why is there a scary shadow lady with a creepy voice in this dream? I don't remember her."

Bowser's eyes blazed. "You're right! She's not supposed to be part of this dream! She's…"

As Bowser rounded on the blond woman, with his eyes blazing, they both spoke at once.

The woman held up her hands plaintively. "Bowser?"

Flames shot from Bowser's mouth as he charged. "Bowsette!"

The woman quickly retreated toward the shadows, but Bowser tackled her with such force, they smashed through the statue, and through the fabric of the dream world itself. As Bowser slowly transformed into a red-haired woman, he snarled. "I remember everything! You *are* an evil ghost babe!"

Bowsette pummeled Bowser's shoulder, her fist bouncing off his toned deltoids. "No! You don't understand! I'm only trying to–"

Bowser awoke in his bed, and slammed the ghostly image of the blond woman into the wall. “Enough! I won’t be controlled by you!”

Gasping, Bowsette grasped at Bowser’s wrist, unable to pull his hand away from her throat. “I don’t…want…to control you…”

Relaxing his chokehold only slightly, Bowser lifted Bowsette up to his face. “No more lies! I want the truth!”

Then, to Bowsette’s horror, she felt herself being tugged forward, and found herself bent over Bowser’s knee, before her legs were pinned tightly in place. “What is this? …What are you…”

Bowsette faltered as she saw Bowser lifting his hand high in the air. Bowser bared his teeth and he glared down at her. “Because of you…I got spanked! Do you have any idea how emasculating that was?”

Bowsette’s eyes went wide as she saw what was about to happen, before it happened. “No! I am a Queen! You can’t do this to–meeeeeeeaaaaaah!””

As Bowser landed the first spank across Bowsette’s soft bottom, Bowsette’s last word trailed off into a wail. Without hesitation, Bowser began to spank Bowsette at a ferocious, though oddly controlled, pace. “So, you were the one behind those weird power ups! And *you* were the one behind that sissy, pink fire! I knew it tasted funny! It was like choking on flowers and candy!”

“That was–Ow!–I was *helping* you! Yah! Aaah-haaa!”

Growling, Bowser slowed the pace of the spanking slightly. “Help? How does it *help* to shove a bunch of magic mushrooms and fire flowers down my throat? And why didn’t you *tell* me what you were up to, hmm? What did you expect me to do, read your mind?”

“But–Aiyaah! B-but we were in the middle of a fight! I didn’t want to distract you so–Oooh! Oho! So I just acted as I thought best! Aaaiiiieeee!”

“As *you* thought best? And what about what *I* thought best? Did you bother to ask? No! You just assumed you could do what you want with *my* body! And thanks to your meddling, I lost the fight with Mario and Luigi!”

“Ouch! Th-that’s not fair! Y-you fought them yourself! Without my–”

Bowser landed the most ferocious clap yet, right across the seat of Bowsette’s skirt. Ignoring her howls, Bowser lifted the hem of her black skirt and rumpled it against her lower back, exposing an old-fashioned pair of voluminous, white women’s undergarments: medieval-style pantaloons. “Precisely! Without your help. I am perfectly capable of fighting my own battles, thank you.”

Bowsette snarled, digging her fingernails into the folding bed's thin mattress. "But you *lost*, you…wait, what are you doing?"

As Bowsette noticed her skirts being pulled up, she felt a sudden chill, followed by a thunderous spank, followed by a rising, angry heat. Bowsette screeched like a banshee.

Bowser shook his head, with a look of disgust, and began the spanking all over again, with renewed vigor. "Oh, spare me the theatrics. I don't *care* that I lost, because it was *my* loss. Next time, I'll get those Mario Brothers, and when I do, it will be *my* win! And if you ever try to take control of me like that again, I'll paddle your royal rump, til it's red and raw!"

Bowsette strained with all her might, but Bowser didn't seem to notice. "Rraah! You–Argh! You *animal!* I'll tear your throat out!"

Bowser landed a final, resounding clap, then paused momentarily. "How unladylike. These are some weird britches you're wearing. If you ask me, you've gotten too big for 'em!"

After failing to stand up, Bowsette tried to lunge forward, only to feel Bowser's hand hook her by the nylon rope that held up her pantaloons, and tug her back into place. "Oof! Release me at once, you stubborn jack–"

With a soft, "Floomp!" Bowsette's pantaloons were tugged roughly down below her wide hips. Already, Bowsette's semi-transparent ass was faintly glowing, with a soft, rose pink light. Bowsette's hair stood on end, as her protests died in her throat.

Bowser landed a single, reverberating spank across the center of Bowsette's bottom. "Nope. We are establishing boundaries…You…" Bowser landed a hard slap to emphasize the last word, then punctuated each word with another firm swat. "...Do not…Control…My…Body…"

Bowsette squealed as she felt the first stroke, then pressed her lips together to hide her screams. By the sixth spank, she was forced to bite on her lip to keep from trembling.

As Bowsette held in her final scream, her whole body shivered. Bowser paused to collect his breath, examining Bowsette's upturned bottom with a philosophical expression. "Now, what have we learned about respecting my boundaries?"

Bowsette took a shaky breath, and clenched her fists. "Respect is earned. He who demands respect neither has it, nor is owed it."

Bowser began the spanking again, quickening the pace. "Bzzzt! Wrong! Incorrectamundo! You're just making excuses, trying to distract from what you did to me, but that's all over now. There's no point trying to save face anymore. You're lying bent over the knee, with your bare butt hanging out, finally getting the spanking you've had coming."

Bowser paused for a single beat to examine his target, “Hrmm…not nearly red enough.”

Then he immediately began spanking Bowsette again. Bowser chuckled as he heard Bowsette start to squeak and squeal after each spank, gradually building the pace faster and faster. “Sounds to me like I’m proving my point!”

Bowsette grit her teeth, seething as she tried to mentally block out the building burn of the spanking. “And…what does this…prove? That you’re bigger than me? Stronger than me?”

Bowser aimed two scorching strokes across Bowsette’s lower buttocks, first her right butt cheek, then her left. “Yes, and yes! Therefore, you are not in a position to push me around. I don’t care about arguing that point with you. I am simply reinforcing that reality, and using your backside as an illustration of a basic law of nature. For every *action*…”

Bowser landed a clap to Bowsette’s left sit spot, the sensitive area where the lower buttock connects to the upper thigh. “...There is an equal, and opposite, *reaction!”*

As a red welt in the shape of a handprint slowly rose across Bowsette’s left buttock, Bowser planted a second smack on Bowsette’s right sit spot with equal force. There was a ghostly image of a white handprint across Bowsette’s right buttock, before it flushed red, a mirror image of the first mark. Bowser stretched his arm, and casually exhaled on his palm. “Now, why don’t we try again? Say you’re sorry for trying to mind-control me, or whatever that was.”

Bowsette took a faltering breath, resolutely staring at the wall. “You can’t make me admit I was wrong by hitting me. I will not be broken.”

Bowser answered with a spank, aimed dead center across Bowsette’s butt crack, his palm covering a good portion of both cheeks. To Bowsette’s displeasure, she discovered that the moisture on Bowser’s palm added a keen, fresh sting to the impact. Bowsette grunted, her voice cracking.

Bowser sighed, shaking his wrist and flexing his fingers to ease the sting across his own palm. “Then we’re at an impasse. I will not be controlled. Once I finish spanking you, I’m torching the crown.”

Bowser could actually see the shiver travel up Bowsette’s spine, from the top of her crowned head to the tip of her turtleish tail. Beads of sweat trickled down both of her bare, pale shoulders. “So be it. I would rather die than surrender. Do your worst.”

“I will.”

But Bowser did *not* start spanking right away.

Bowsette waited for a few seconds, tensing herself as she anticipated the next blow. Then she waited further, every passing second becoming more agonizing.

Finally, Bowsette craned her neck to peep around her shoulder.

The moment that Bowser and Bowsette made eye contact, Bowser began the spanking again.

Bowsette yelped like a puppy, then covered her mouth, steadily rocking forward and backward with the rhythm of the slaps. Bowser only carried on, confident that slowly, but steadily, we would win in the end. Just like his childhood hero: the tortoise from Aesop's fable!

In a desperate bid to suppress her screams, Bowsette bit her palm, then slapped the mattress, twisting her fingernails deep into the soft fabric. Finally, she let out a little mew, like a kitten, and as two tears spilled down her eyes, she screamed. "Just…just end it!"

Bowser landed three of his hardest spanks, then paused. "If you want me to put you out of your misery, just say so. But, first, I want an apology. Spankings not over til I get it."

Bowsette took a shaky breath, and quickly wiped away her tears. But she knew the broken quality in her voice would fool no one. "I…I will not apologize for acting as I did. Without my magic, we would have surely died. Nevertheless…I should not have concealed myself from you. Nor forced my magic upon you. For that, and that alone, I beg your forgiveness…And not because you struck me, but because I truly regret having done so."

Bowser chuckled, and patted Bowsette's bottom playfully. "See? Now, was that so hard? Stand up, sweet cheeks. Look me in the eye."

Bowsette stood to attention like a soldier, her face composed. Apart from her tear-stained cheeks, there wasn't a single hint on her face that she had suffered any pains. "So, this is the end. If you're waiting for me to grovel, or beg for my life, I will not give you that satisfaction. Do what you will with me."

Bowser blew a raspberry. "Don't be so dramatic, theater kid. I'm not gonna kill you."

As Bowsette blinked, the flecks of tears on her eyelashes sparkled like stars. "You're not? But, you said–"

Bowser tapped the crown on his own skull. "I said I'd torch the crown if we didn't come to an understanding. Seems we have. I'm not your puppet. Now that we're clear on that point, you're still my best ticket out of this dump. But from now on, no more secrets. If you've got any crazy ghost powers that can magic us out of here, I need to know."

As she realized her life was being spared, Bowsette exhaled, thankful for every breath. "Your own brute strength is more than enough to break these paltry iron bars. You know that."

“So, that means you *do* know my thoughts.”

Bowsette bit her tongue, then smiled. “In a way. I share your mind, to a degree. What you see, I see. But I don’t know everything. It’s more like…I’m getting to know you, over time.”

“Then why can’t I read your mind?”

“You can ‘read my mind’ just as easily as I can ‘read your mind.’ We’re both doing it, right now.”

Scratching his head, Bowser recalled one of his many ferocious battles with Mario over the years. This particular memory involved both of them throwing magic hats at one another in a duel to the death on the Moon. “I’ve been possessed by magic hats before, but that felt different. Come on, out with it. What are you, exactly? This isn’t like any Boo magic I’ve ever seen…”

Bowsette rolled her eyes. “I already explained that I’m not a Boo. I’m…basically, I’m like the ghost of–”

Bowser stood face to face with Bowsette, his eyes narrow. “No, you’re not the ghost of Queen Toadstool, either. You ain’t a ghost at all. Quit fibbing, or you're going right back across my knee, and I’ll spank the truth out of you.”

Bowsette tensed at the mention of another spanking, her temper starting to prickle, along with her stinging bottom. “There’s no need for threats. And I wasn’t lying, I was merely trying to explain–wait, so you were actually paying attention to me, the first time?”

“Well, duh! I love the history of the ancient Mushroom Kingdom! Queen Toadstool was a top-notch enchantress, but not even she could cheat death. I may only dabble a bit with necromancy in my spare time, but even I know there’s no magic that can restore life to the dead. Not real life, anyway. Dry Bones, Zombies, they’re all just pale imitations of life, like puppets. But you’re clearly alive.”

“Yes, exactly! In fact, Queen Toadstool was the first magician to prove that it’s impossible for magic to ever grant true immortality. It’s contrary to the very nature of the human soul. Ghosts and Boos may wander this world for a time, but sooner or later, even they must pass on, to the next life. Yet, as she approached the end of her life, Queen Toadstool knew that she must pass on her wisdom, to protect the Mushroom Kingdom for millenia to come. So, she developed an ingenious alternative: into her crown, she poured all her remaining magic, her experience, her will power.”

“Her soul?”

“Of course not her soul. But she could preserve her will. You might say that the Crown of Queen Toadstool represents her last will and testament.”

“So that’s you? You’re like a copy of the first Queen of the Mushroom Kingdom?”

“No, because a human soul cannot be copied. I remember fragments about the first Queen Toadstool, but to me, they are all memories of reading books about her, because *you* have read books about her. Because I *am* you. The Crown is not a person. It is a thing that stores magic: a magic designed for one purpose, and one purpose only…”

Bowser looked deep into Bowsette’s blue eyes, and saw his own reflection staring back at him. “To protect, and rule, the Mushroom Kingdom.”

Bowsette looked just as deeply into Bowser’s eyes, their foreheads almost touching. “And as long as that remains your purpose, I can exist, as Bowsette.”

“So, if the Crown was ever stolen from me–”

Bowsette smiled coyly. “Oh, I doubt you’d ever be that careless.”

Bowser frowned. “Hypothetically, say I give the crown to someone else, and they put it on, then they wouldn’t become Bowsette? You would…be them?”

Bowsette stepped so close to Bower, they were nose to nose. “Assuming they wanted to protect, and rule, the Mushroom Kingdom, even a little bit, then it’s possible. But the more strongly someone wishes to rule the Mushroom Kingdom, the more I would become like them…and you *really* want to rule the Mushroom Kingdom.”

Bowsette lightly wrapped her arms around Bowser’s waist. The sensation took Bowser by surprise. It reminded him, painfully, that he was still trapped in a woman’s body. But now that he was so close to Bowsette, the strange similarities between them only served to highlight the differences. As Bowser felt her press her soft, feminine form against his, he felt strangely manly again, even despite his foreign breasts and child-bearing hips.

Bowsette sank her head onto Bowser’s shoulder. “So, I hope you never plan on leaving me behind. I live only to serve you, my Lord.”

Bowser thumbed his chin. “Hmm…your Lord, huh? I like the sound of that. If you’re me, that means you can never betray me! On the other hand, if you really are the undead ghost-zombie of an evil sorceress, that’s exactly the kind of thing you would say, to put me off my guard.”

Bowsette leaned in, as if for a kiss. “Well, there is a way to test that theory. If you ever doubt my loyalty, even for a moment…you can always kill me.”

Bowser grasped Bowsette by the waist, catching her by surprise as he pulled her into a tighter embrace, more like a death grip than a hug. Then he put his index finger under Bowsette’s chin,

gently nudging her head up to look him in the eyes. “Oh, I can think of a much more fitting way to ‘test your loyalty.’”

Bowsette shivered as she felt Bowser’s heart beating against her bosom. “...And that is?”

Bowser roughly pulled out of the hug, holding Bowsette at arms length. Then Bowser spun her around on her heels, and pointed toward the corner of the cell. “Simple, I’m putting you in timeout, little Miss Bowsette.”

Bowsette blinked, before she felt Bowser give her a firm slap across the rear to motivate her to move forward. Bowsette yelped and shielded her behind. “Yow! Hey, what was that for?”

Bowser straightened up, crossing his arms to highlight his rippling biceps. “You say you live to obey and serve me, as your Lord? Well, your Lord says you’re still on thin ice for trying to pull my strings behind the scenes. So now you’re gonna march your little keister right over to that corner, and press your nose against the wall.”

Bowsette’s pale face flushed beet red. “Huh? But…I’m not a mewling child! I am a Queen!”

“And I’m your King! So if you don’t want to get another spanking on your naughty little bottom, then get that butt in timeout, on the double.”

Bowsette’s eyes blazed as she squared up to Bowser. They were exactly the same height, but something in Bowsette’s pose revealed what they both knew: she was no match for Bowser. Finally, Bowsette sighed, bowing her blond head low. “Yes, my King. I will obey.”

Meekly, Bowsette turned and stepped lightly toward the corner, her head held high, with royal poise.

Bowser hummed. “That’s more like it. But I think we can still do better. Lift up your dress. I want to see how red your butt still is, after your spanking.”

Bowsette’s regal posture vanished in an instant as her shoulders stiffened. She twisted around, flashing her sharp fangs, before pouting. “Yes, my Lord. Your wish is my command.”

Lifting her turtle tail up high, Bowsette bent low to hike up her black skirt, buttoning it in place above her bottom, just below her tail.

“Huh, I didn’t know Princesses’ frilly dresses could do that. How convenient!” thought Bowser.

Then Bowsette gracefully lowered her pantaloons. Sure enough, her bottom still had a healthy, bright red color. It perfectly matched a power mushroom in its shade, hue, and chroma. As Bowsette bent over slightly to press her nose into the corner, she lightly held up her skirts on

either side, as if performing a curtsey. The result was that her bottom was perfectly framed by the fabric, presenting a perfect picture for Bowser's inspection.

Bowsette spoke softly, concealing most of her rage. "Does this position please you, Lord Bowser?"

Bowser bent low to inspect the lingering effects of the spanking, and was pleased with the results of his work as a spanker. "You're being awfully compliant. No arguments? No threats? No complaints about being ill-used, *Queen* Koopa?"

Bowsette paused to take a deep breath before answering. "No, *King* Koopa. It is the humble duty of a Queen to accept discipline and instruction from her King. I am but a lowly woman, and know my place."

Bowser strolled over to his fold out bed to get a better view of the lovely sight. "And would that be?"

"My place is wherever you wish it to be. Whether I am standing at your side…or kneeling, beneath your heel."

Bowser stretched, and yawned. "Or bending across my knee?"

"If it pleases my Lord to correct me so, then will I accept it gladly."

Bowser started to settle onto his bed. "This is by far the best magical deal I've ever struck! I only wish all my goons were as submissive as–yooooo-hooo!"

The moment Bowser sat down, he flinched and leapt to his feet. "Yeeargh! That smarts! Just how hard did Daisy…"

Bowser squinted as he tugged down his boxers to examine his backside in the cracked mirror. "Wait a minute, my butt wasn't this red a minute ago. Bowsette, come take a look at this!"

Bowsette did not move from her spot in timeout. "Am I being released from my imprisonment in the corner, my Lord?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure, whatever. Timeout's over. Just get over here, I want to check…"

Bowsette appeared at Bowser's side, mirroring his posture. Sure enough, both their bottoms bore identical red marks, with the minor exception that Bowser had a darker, golden brown skin tone. Bowser could even make out the matching shape of his own handprints. "What is this?"

Bowsette glanced at Bowser, looking suspiciously innocent, as she nudged Bowser's bare bottom with her own. "Well, master…I am you, after all…so when you chose to discipline me–justly, and harshly, as I deserved–well, let's just say you showed remarkable *self-discipline*."

As Bowser straightened up, Bowsette stood alongside him, both lowering their skirts. Bowser cleared his throat. "You know, on second thought, now that we're deciding to trust one another, I think I'd like to go for more of a partner-to-partner relationship. Ya know, as opposed to the evil-boss-hapless-minion dynamic."

Bowsette took Bowser's hands in hers, holding up so that their fingers interlaced. "I am honored by your newfound confidence in me, my Lord…but if you are ever displeased with my service, do hesitate to *justly* chasten me again. For so as long as it is your aim to rule, and protect, the Mushroom Kingdom, so I am yours, to command."

Then, Bowsette kneeled before Bowser, and before he could object, she bent her head low to gently kiss his feet, one after the other.

Bowser heard the prison door rattle as it was unlocked, and dove forward to hide Bowsette from sight. "No one's here! …I mean, uh, occupied?"

The door opened and Toadette appeared holding a tray. "Bowser? It's lunch time."

Bowser waved his hands, glancing around the room for a hiding spot to stuff Bowsette. "No need! I'm not feeling hungry! Um, we *girls* have to watch our figures, right? Ha ha!"

But as Bowser glanced behind him, he saw Bowsette had disappeared.

Toadette marched up to the yellow safety line, and halted. "Ahem. Bowser, please be seated, so I can serve you your lunch."

"Huh? Oh, c'mon! Just hand it to me."

Toadette raised her voice. "Sit your butt down, little Mister!"

Bowser obeyed, ignoring the scream of protest as he rested his weight down on the bed.

With a harrumph, Toadette pushed the tray through the slot, then backed away. "You hurt a lot of people today. You almost killed Princess Peach. Maybe, while you're stuck here, you should think hard about that."

Toadette pointed two fingers to wordlessly add, *"I've got my eyes on you,"* before she left the dungeon, and slammed the door behind her.

As Bowser crawled on his hands and knees to reach the plate of food, a simple meal of water, bread and cheese, he glimpsed himself in the mirror, and froze.

His hair was golden blond.

…

Mario and Luigi opened the door for Princess Peach and Princess Daisy, as they all emerged from Toadsworth's office.

Luigi sighed with relief. "Well, I've had enough excitement for one day. All I want to do now is kick up my feet and relax."

Daisy slapped her cheeks, then turned to grab Luigi by the shoulders. "Oh no! Luigi, everyone thinks you spanked Bowser! I can't let you take the fall for me. We need to call to my dad! He always knows just what to do in a crisis."

Before Luigi could do anything, he found himself pinned in a loving, but unbreakable headlock. "Y-your Dad?"

Daisy whipped out her phone and pressed a button on the homescreen labeled "DAD 9-1-1!"

The King of Sarasaland's face appeared on the screen. "Hmm. Daisy, darling? Is everything okay?"

"Daddy! I'm in trouble! I spanked a foreign monarch, and caused an international incident!"

The King stroked his beard. "...Can I at least assume this foreign monarch deserved to get spanked?"

Daisy nodded. "Oh yeah, this time, I made absolutely sure of it first! I did what I had to do!"

"Well, then I suppose it can't be helped. We'll just have to deal with the political fallout from this foreign…King? Queen?"

"Funny you should ask that. It's kind of a long story. Luigi, say hi to my Dad."

Luigi swallowed a lump in his throat. "Um, hello, sir."

"Say! What was the deal with you spanking that mystery woman on the television, Luigi. I'm surprised at you. I thought you were a gentleman!"

Daisy groaned. "Daaaad! You can't believe what you see on cable news! That was just me, disguised as Luigi!"

“What? Why were you wearing Luigi’s clothes? What happened to your clothing?”

Daisy shrugged, hugging Luigi tightly against her chest with one arm. “Like I said, it’s a long story! Say, is Azalea there?”

A muffled, preteen girl’s voice echoed from the phone. “Dad? Is that Daisy?”

Daisy’s little sister, Azalea dove into her father’s chest to get a better view of the video call. “Day-zee?”

Stars appeared in Daisy’s eyes. “Ay-Zee!”

Azalea and Daisy squealed in that particular, adorable way sisters do, when they haven’t seen each other in weeks. Finally, Daisy rounded on Luigi. “C’mon, Luigi! Let’s go find a nice spot, so we can tell them all about how you saved my life, and how I spanked Bowser!”

“Wait, the King you spanked was Bowser? Ah, vaya!” said the King.

Daisy grinned from ear to ear. “Yeah, you should have seen it! And Peach and Mario were there too! They–”

Daisy paused as she spotted Mario and Peach standing awkwardly to the side. Then Daisy bent low to whisper into Luigi’s ear. “C’mon, Luigi, let’s give those two love birds some privacy!”

Luigi’s hat flopped down over his eyes as he twisted to look at his brother, still pinned in an iron headlock. “Love birds? You mean…well, I always figured that Mario–yoiiikes!”

Then, Daisy sprinted down the hallway, pulling Luigi in tow.

Mario and Princess Peach found themselves alone. Outside, the birds were singing softly in the central castle courtyard.

Nervously, Mario pulled off his hat, and held it to his chest. “Princess.”

Peach clasped her hands together. “Mario.”

“I’ve been thinking–oh, you first!” said both Mario and Peach, at the exact same time. Peach started to giggle.

Mario only smiled, and put his hat back on. “After you, Princess. I insist.”

Peach blushed as she covered her mouth, wondering if her giggle sounded childish. “Well, I’ve been thinking. You and I have been running ourselves ragged for weeks now. This is the first time I’ve had an afternoon open…”

Mario bowed his head. “...and with the Grand Ball coming up, you may not get another day off for a long time.”

“Exactly! Wow, you read my mind! So…I’d like to do something, to thank you for all you’ve done for us.”

Mario opened his mouth, but Peach held up a hand to cut him off. “Hold on! I know that you believe virtue is its own reward. Don’t worry, I’m not planning to throw gold coins at you, or make you sit on a parade float. But, because it’s my day off, what I’d most like to do is…to do something for you, to say thank you...for being such a good friend.”

“I’m just so happy everyone made it hope safe, Princess. What more could I possibly ask for?”

“But, there must be something! Oh, I know…your cake! You never even got to try a bite of the cake I made for you! I’ll just zip on over to the kitchen and I’ll bake you the most scrumptious cake you’ve ever seen!”

“Princess, you don’t have to spend your one day off slaving over a hot stove, just for me.”

Peach shook her head, and waved her finger. “Nah, ah! None of that! I have made up my mind, and I will not be dissuaded! I love baking cakes! And I love sharing them with my friends! And I love…sharing my cakes with you, most of all, Mario.”

Mario nodded. “Very well. In that case, I do have a request. Please allow me to accompany you to the kitchen.”

Peach pouted, and put her fists on her hips. “Mario! Every time you’re in the kitchen, you volunteer to do half the work! I want this to be a special day, just for you!”

Now it was Mario’s turn to shake his head, waving his finger in a mirror image of Peach’s gesture. “Nah, ah! Fuggedaboudit! I don’t want to sit in a silent dining hall, waiting to be served. I want to spend my special day helping out my best friend. To thank you, for all you’ve done for me.”

Peach pretended to pout, as a form of token resistance before giving in. But before she could, Mario’s words struck her. “Your best friend? Am I really, Mario? What about Luigi?”

Mario spread his arms out, the universal Italian-American gesture of joy. “Ay! He’s my twin brother! Being brothers is a different thing altogether. If we punch each other, it’s another way of saying ‘I love ya!’ just a little harder!”

Peach toyed with the idea of punching Mario's shoulder, hard. But at the last moment, she hesitated. "So, we're the kind of best friends…who don't punch each other?"

"Yeah, ya' know. I bet you and Daisy have all kinds of little things you do, that are…your special things. Stuff that just wouldn't make sense to me and Luigi."

As they made their way to the kitchen, Peached donned her apron on autopilot, tying a kerchief around her hair. "Oh, I know the sort of thing you mean. Back in Princess Academy, Daisy used to snap by butt with a wet towel, all the time! I was so…"

Peach's eyes popped open as she realized what she was saying out loud. "...embarassed."

Mario shrugged, and donned an apron of his own. "Eh, nothing to be ashamed of. Luigi and I did the same thing to each other, back at ole' Saint Pat's."

Peach smiled as they fell naturally into baking the cake together. "Thank you, Mario. You always know just what to say."

For the first time in a long time, Peach and Mario enjoyed a quiet afternoon, with absolutely no adventures to interrupt them.

The End

Bowsette's Princess Lessons
Chapter XXII: The Author's Barely Disguised Fetish, Revealed

[Editor's Note: After a long search, our team finally discovered the script for an unproduced "Lost Episode." The script included a hand-written note in red ink which read, 'Are you kidding? No way we can put this on network television.']

Bowsette awoke with a start, snorting, his/her red hair in a tangled mess. "Gah! What an awful dream!

Bowsette rubbed his/her eyes, smacking his/her lips. As the camera cut, Bowsette's hair suddenly turned blond. In fact, every single time the camera cut, Bowser's entire color palette swapped. This was likely either a spectacular series of animation errors, or some smart aleck's idea of a visual gag. "Hey, waittaminnit! I'm still having a dream…so that means…"

Bowsette clawed at the wall, tearing a hole in the very fabric of reality. The wall ripped aside like a curtain, revealing a little woman with thick spectacles typing on a lap top, wearing Super Mario Bros. themed pajamas. Hanging above her bed was a cheeky poster of Donkey Kong that said, "You May Spank It…Once!"

The woman started as she spotted Bowsette staring at her through the dimensional break in the fourth wall. "...Uh oh."

Bowsette snarled, and grabbed the woman by the collar. "I knew it! You're the one responsible for everything that's been happening to me!"

The woman flailed her arms and kicked her feet, uselessly, dangling like a mouse from Bowsette's claws! "Eek! N-now, let's not be hasty. Why don't we introduce ourselves? I'm Yu May! And I'm just a humble fan-fiction author. There's no need to get upset!

"No need? Because of you, I'm stuck in this prison cell. What am I supposed to do? Spend years waiting for the sequel, while my kids wait for Daddy to come home?"

"Well, technically, only about one day has passed in your continuity since–"

Bowsette roared, bending Yu May across his knee. "Enough! Prepare for punishment, nerd!"

Yu May's eyes popped open as she felt Bowsette tugging down her Super Mario pajama pants with one clean yank, revealing her dorky "Cat Peach" panties from Walmart. "No! You can't do this! It's going to ruin the immersive experience!"

Bowsette clapped Yu May hard, smack across the center of her petite bottom. "Oh yeah? How's this for an immersive experience!"

Yu May squealed, kicking her feet. “Eek! No! I can’t willingly suspend my disbelief that this is happening to me!”

Bowsette delivered two spanks, more quickly, one across each of Yu May’s buttocks. “Well, too bad, so sad! Thanks to you, I’ve been getting by butt blistered, battered, and burned! So, now it’s your turn!”

Yu May howled, her legs shivering as she bounced from the impacts, her bottom already a rose-pink color after only three swats. “Yowwie! This is not nearly as fun as I imagined imagining it would be! Ow! Ouch! Owwie, wow-wow!”

Bowsette scowled as he/she increased the speed of the spanking to a rapid-fire pace. “And don’t think I don’t know your type. You’re one of those disgusting dirty-girls who post self-insert fan-fics on the internet! Just look at these absurd underpants! Well, I know exactly what to do with dorks like you!”

Grabbing the waistband of the aforementioned undergarments, Bowsette tugged them tight, pulling them over Yu May’s head in an atomic wedgie. Bowsette rolled back his/her head and laughed. “Bwa ha har! How do you like being degraded and humiliated? Not so fun, is it? Being put on public spectacle, being made a laughing stock, being…”

Bowsette froze. “Wait a minute…are you enjoying this?”

Still wearing her underpants on her head, Yu May twisted to look over her shoulder, looking bashful. “...Maybe?”

Groaning, Bowsette slapped his/her own face. “Ugh! Disgusting! How am I supposed to ruthlessly bully you?”

“Well, you could always try verbal abuse. I’m a pretty sensitive person.”

Bowsette stroked his/her chin, humming. Then Bowsette gently pulled Yu May’s panties back down, releasing her from the atomic wedgie. They were slightly rumpled from being stretched so roughly. Bowsette patted Yu May’s bottom gently. “You poor thing! I bet you had some sort of traumatic childhood experience that really messed you up, didn’t you?”

Yu May nodded, her eyes watery. “Yeah, you see, I got spanked a lot as a kid. As a result, I developed a psychological condition known as–”

Bowsette yanked Yu May’s panties down, revealing her bare backside to the camera. “Don’t care! Clearly, you need lots more spanking, or you wouldn’t be bent over my knee. This scrawny little butt’s just begging for it!”

Bowsette began the spanking again, and this time, Yu May's squeals became more desperate. "Yeeow! Hey! Watch it! You're going to get us labeled NSFW!"

"You're in no position to argue. I'm going to spank you until you agree to write a new story, where I marry Princess Peach, and live happily ever after!"

"Never, you fiend! I refuse to compromise on my artistic integrity!"

"Said the Super Mario Brothers erotic spanking fetish fan-fiction author."

Yu May flinched, then reached into her hoodie pocket. "Oh yeah? Well, how about…this!"

Yu May held aloft the most overpowered weapon in all of fiction: a smart phone. "Maybe my story is an absurd, self-indulgent fan-fiction, but I'm still the author of this story! Unhand me, you brute!"

Bowsette sneered, and delivered a final, reverberating slap. "Or else, what?"

Wincing, Yu May opened the Google Docs app and navigated to her unfinished rough drafts. She bit her lip as she typed. "And then…Bowsette's…boobs…got…bigger."

And then, Bowsette's boobs got bigger. Bowsette stared down at his/her watermelon-sized breasts. "Aaargh! What did you do?"

And then, Bowsette's boobs got even bigger, expanding like two, bouncy beach balls!

Bowsette grasped his/her steadily inflating breasts with horror. "All right! All right! You win! Just put me back to normal!"

Yu May grinned wickedly. "Gladly! And then…Bowsette's…breasts…shrunk…back to…their normal…size."

And then, Bowsette's breasts shrunk back to their normal size.

Yu May whistled with relief. "Phew!"

Bowsette touched his/her breasts experimentally, perhaps afraid that Yu May would recycle that idea in a later chapter. Then Bowsette pinched the back of Yu May's hoodie, lifting her up like a kitten. "Hey, before I let you go…why'd you write this fan fiction anyway?"

Blushing, Yu May covered her front as she noticed her Princess Peach panties dangling across her knees, and her Super Mario pajamas dangling across her ankles. "Oh…well, you know what they say: 'Being a writer is like showing your butt to the world.' Once I got started writing, it was

like I was finally able to share something about myself, that I'd never been able to talk about before."

Yu May stared through the other fourth wall, looking right at the camera. "So, to everyone reading my silly stories…spank you very much!"

Bowsette rolled his/her eyes, bouncing Yu May by her hoodie so that she twisted around, revealing her bare butt to the camera. "Ack! Gag me with a spoon!"

Then, Bowsette delivered a spank with such force, Yu May went flying through the hole in the fabric of reality, back into her own world. Still bare bottomed, Yu May smacked face first against the poster of Donkey Kong's plump rear end, then flopped down onto her bed. Her eyes were cartoony spirals, and she had a goofy grin on her face.

Bowsette spotted a zipper hanging in mid air, and zipped it to close the tear in the fabric of reality. "There, that'll teach her! Finally, I can concentrate on achieving my inevitable victory! And now that I know I'm in a fan-fiction written by an autistic woman with a thinly-veiled spanking fetish, I can use this forbidden knowledge to my advantage! Oh, just think of the plot implications! First, I'll–"

Bowsette snapped awake from a deep sleep, looking groggily around the room. "Woah! That was strange. I dreamt I was trapped in some sort of absurd fan fiction, only to wake up at the end and realize…it was all just a dream. Ugh, I hate those kinds of cop-out endings. Talk about corny. Anyway, back to sleep!"

Bowsette settled back down onto bed, and instantly started snoring. "Honk! Mi-mi-mi-mi!"

Is was the most restful sleep Bowsette had gotten in ages, full of dreams where the good guys always lose, and the bad guys always win.

The End

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